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THE UK'S NO.1 MULTIFORMAT GAMES MAG
GAMES MASTER
Issue 336 / December 2018

"All the big-hitting series have their latest games reviewed here"



Hello, and welcome to the 336th edition of GamesMaster. It's another issue packed with games we love, and you'll love too. You can tell Christmas is almost upon us, as big-hitting series such as Call Of Duty and Assassin's Creed have their latest instalments reviewed right here.

Elsewhere, we recount the fascinating story of Dungeons & Dragons, and how the tabletop RPG would come to shape videogames. Then there's all the regular madness, with previews of Battlefield V and Days Gone, while RetroMaster takes on the Amiga-powered might of The Bitmap Brothers.

In sadder news, it's my unfortunate duty to inform you that this will be the final issue of GamesMaster. The past 25 (almost 26!) years have seen videogames mature as an artform, changing as they have become a dominant form of media, and GamesMaster has been there to celebrate them every step of the way. It's been a privilege to be involved, but it has always been the enthusiasm of the mag's readers - you! - that has driven it.

Enjoy one last GM!

Ian Evenden – Editor

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Online at www.gamesradar.com/gamesmaster

EDITOR'S CHOICE
MY TOP PICKS THIS ISSUE

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Team GM

Meet The Magazine's Makers!



THE MOST DEDICATED TEAM IN THE BUSINESS

This month the team held a games party to toast the mag's final issue. Ian stabbed in Assassin's Creed Odyssey, Miriam built in Dragon Quest Builders, and Rob hooned about in Forza. They're a sociable bunch.



Ian Evenden
Installed in the curiously body-hugging editor's chair just in time for the mag's final issue, the new ed was looking forward to exercising his new-found power for good, but will now have to take it elsewhere. That is, if the chair will ever let him go...

Which mech would you pilot in a brawl?
An Imperator-class Titan



Rob Crossland
The mag's esteemed art editor was perturbed to discover that Assetto Corsa Competizione doesn't feature actual Vauxhall Corsas. The RS Cosworth in Forza Horizon 4, however, spoke to his inner boy racer and made him a happy man.

Which mech would you pilot in a brawl?
Jazz the Transformer's Porsche 935 incarnation



Leon Hurley
When not playing early access games, and having an awful pun made on his name, Leon likes to relax by watching Leslie Nielsen movies, particularly those set on aircraft. He must get tired watching them over and over, surely? "No, and don't call me Hurley," he quips.

Which mech would you pilot in a brawl?
Gypsy Danger



Jess Kinghorn
Having reviewed a visual novel for us this month, Jess now wants to invert the concept and usher in a new great age of text adventures. "Videoliterature! New works by great modern authors, in interactive form!" she enthuses. Put like that, we'd certainly play them.

Which mech would you pilot in a brawl?
Voltron



Future PLC, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Editorial
Editor **Ian Evenden**
Art Editor **Rob Crossland**
Operations Editor **Miriam McDonald**

Contributors
Benjamin Burns, Anne-Marie Coyle, Ian Dransfield, Fraser Gilbert, Benjamin Griffin, Malindy Hetfeld, Leon Hurley, Luke Kemp, Jess Kinghorn, Chris Schilling, Alex Spencer, Oscar Taylor-Kent, Robin Valentine, Richard Wakeling, Alan Wen, Robert Zak

Advertising
Media packs are available on request
Commercial Director **Clare Dove**
clare.dove@futurenet.com
Account Director, Games **Kevin Stoddart**
kevin.stoddart@futurenet.com
01225 687 455
Director of Agency Sales **Matt Downs**

International
GamesMaster is available for licensing. Contact the International department to discuss partnership opportunities
International Licensing Director **Matt Ellis**
matt.ellis@futurenet.com

Subscriptions
Email enquiries **gamesmaster@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk**
UK orderline & enquiries **0844 848 2852**
Overseas order line and enquiries **+44 (0)1604 251045**
Online orders & enquiries **www.myfavouritemagazines.co.uk**
Head of subscriptions **Sharon Todd**

Circulation
Head of Newstrade **Tim Mathers**

Production
Head of Production **Mark Constance**
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Brand Director **Tony Mott**
Senior Art Editor **Warren Brown**

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That's all folks

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Chief executive **Zillah Byng-Thorne**
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Chief financial officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

Now Fortnite's out on Switch, you could sit on the sofa with pals and their Switches and have 'couchplay' of sorts. Give it a go!

FANBASE

The best of your emails, tweets, and carrier pigeon death threats

LETTER OF THE MONTH

There's still a place for split-screen, says Gavin Eggar

When we were all younger the thrill of going to a friend's house or having family round and playing a videogame split-screen or couch co-op was amazing. Fast forward and now with the boom of so many multiplayer-only games why has the option to play with real friends at home disappeared?

My son loves Roblox and Fortnite, two games which would be amazing in split-screen or co-op, but instead it's playing mostly against faceless players over broadband. I found my son being bullied out of games on Roblox just because he wasn't playing how they wanted him to. That wouldn't happen as much with local multiplayer. There is definitely place for single-player, online multiplayer, and split-screen, especially with the boom of battle royale style games... it's a great excuse to connect with friends and family again living in this digital age instead of kids shutting themselves away in their rooms with no social interaction
Gavin Eggar, email



Seeing where all the other players land would ruin the stealth aspect of Fortnite, we feel.

First, we're sad to hear your son's being bullied, and it would be worth contacting the companies behind both games to complain, as firms are making increasing efforts to combat toxic behaviour from players.

But we'd guess the trend towards online multiplayer isn't going to go away, especially when some have 99 people playing at once. It simply wouldn't be practical to have more than four players sharing a TV screen, and split-screen would undermine the stealth element in those games – you can't really sneak up on someone who can see you coming.

All that said, couchplay's not dead – recent launches Overcooked 2 and Catastronauts show that, and as they support up to four players lots of people can join in. Also Treyarch didn't reveal it until very close to launch but Call Of Duty: Black Ops 4 also has split-screen co-op for two players (four in Zombies mode). ■

THANKS!

It's been great hearing from you over the years. If you need to get in touch with us with a query or comment, you'll be able to reach us this way for a few more weeks:

Email gamesmaster@futurenet.com

Post GamesMaster, Future, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1AU, UK

Rockstar heist

I'm an avid fan of all the games Rockstar have made, and have been since I started way back in the day with San Andreas, which is a true classic. Today, however, I'm very worried that their newest game, Red Dead Redemption 2, will not live up to my expectations, not in the gameplay aspect. I'm very excited to get into the open wilderness in gorgeous HD. What I'm concerned about is the business model Rockstar employed with GTA 5 and it's online, where everything is ridiculously expensive, and missions become a tedious chore.

I'm worried that they will bring this method back for Red Dead online, and even worse, implement microtransactions into the single-player. What if they charge you hundreds of thousands for a new horse? What if they charge even MORE for stallions, or for better breeds? It's very worrying with how poorly GTA Online was dealt with, where some cars cost millions, and missions only give out thousands at a time, not to mention houses, warehouses, and other vehicles on top of that.

It may seem a tad silly, but if the game does have these leeching micro-transactions anywhere near the single player, I know I will be boycotting the game. I pray that they give us a good experience both on and offline, I really want to love this game, but I cannot accept this kind of EA-esque schemes.

So to summarise, I won't accept any kind of bad treatment of us, the consumer, and I hope they listen to us and revert it if they do add these, or at least tone them down.
Aston Cooke, email

Rockstar is planning to launch Red Dead Online alongside Red Dead Redemption 2, Aston, and as there are no subscription fees we're guessing the approach will be similar to GTA Online. Buyers of the single-player game will automatically have access to it, but you won't have to play it to play through the single-player game. However, a trophy list recently leaked suggests you *will* have to play online to Platinum it, which might anger completionists.

Born to be Dad

Has anyone had any funny online stories while playing videogames?

I remember once on Battlefield 2 as soon as you started a game most of us

READER REVIEW

Scott Jones writes in with his thoughts on **Marvel's Spider-Man**

Right from the get go you can tell that what you're about to play is something special. It's an immense start to one hell of a blockbuster experience!

The web-swinging uses more or less the same system as in Spider-Man 2 on the PS2, and combat is decent, but photo mode is a blast! The environment is lovely, so realistic and chock-a-block with side quests, collectables, towers, bases and photo ops. Voice acting is superb, and the score complements the game well – when diving from buildings or swinging around it makes you feel like a superhero!

The story is something we have not gotten before, with iconic characters, but not exactly the way we know them from other media sources.

Spider-Man is back, and in force, in one of PlayStation 4's greatest exclusives. Thank you Marvel, Sony, and Insomniac for bringing us the best Spider-man game to date!

95%



"ON THE MIC COMES HIS DAD GOING MAD AT ME"

would try and jump in a jeep and get to one of the flags straightaway to capture it… one day this person got in a jeep and just sat there not communicating. I was going "Come on man, we need to go. What are you doing? Hurry up!" suddenly on the mic comes his Dad going mad at me saying, "Don't tell my boy what to do!" (He was also in the game.) It turns out his son was waiting for his Dad who was VERY slow… and really angry…
Sam Hamilton, email

Needless to say we're not massive fans of online voice-chat shenanigans, especially if we're likely to run across someone doing a very good Kratos impersonation in Battlefield 2, BOY! Though we do like watching Rob try not to swear during online races. That never stops being funny.

Fight club

What game has the best combat ever, and why?

God Hand. Unbelievably customisable, ruthlessly difficult, and the camera angle is off-putting to those who aren't willing to put the time in to master it. The perfect learning curve for a sadomasochist.
Orange Caution, @OrangeCaution

I enjoy Witcher 3 on harder difficulties because of how much it forces you to think about properly preparing for a fight. Not many other RPGs I've come across manage to convey that mechanic so dynamically.
Josh Boyles, @joshyboyles2

Anything turn based. I'm old school. Old school FF for me.
Lauren Coupe, @Lozzykinz

Story's over

What was your favourite Telltale game?

TWD because I loved the story and characters
Jay KaneWood, @JayTheGamerKW

Although I enjoy pretty much all of them, the first season of The Walking Dead was the pinnacle. A sustainable cast of characters that equalled that of the comic/TV series for sure.
Kevin Kissane, @Agent_Prince

Wolf among us was my fave. A twist on the classics. but the GoT series was great too.
Louis, @LouixBlenkTron

The Wolf Among Us. It introduced me to the Fables comic series and now I'm a huge fan of that. Plus Wolfie is flipping awesome.
Lycanthrope Lauren, @LozzimusPrime

I've never played any of the Walking Dead or Wolf Among Us or anything like that, but I absolutely loved Strong Bad's Cool Game For Attractive People back on the Wii! I loved the humour, and it was my first introduction to the Homestar Runner characters, which got me hooked!
Jacob BOO-chmann, @SpaghettiPirate

OFF THE CHART!

The hot topics you've been gabbing about



What time period should Assassin's Creed visit?

- **5%** Ancient Rome
- **43%** Edo period Japan
- **30%** The 1980s
- **22%** World War II

YOUR TOP 5 MOST WANTED

The most exciting upcoming games, as voted for by you on our Facebook and Twitter pages



RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

Format PS4, XO **ETA** 26 October
There's hardly any time at all until we're all let loose on Rockstar's wide open range – and the record for 'best-selling game ever' gets smashed…



CYBERPUNK 2077

Format PS4, XO, PC **ETA** TBC
Will this game come out before we hit the real cyberpunk dystopia? Our cover feature in GM 333 thinks it's in with a chance, and might be amazing too.



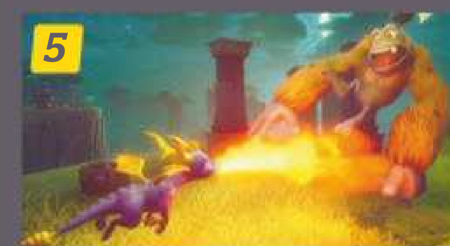
THE LAST OF US PART II

Format PS4 **ETA** TBC
At least Naughty Dog's latest will probably arrive before the actual apocalypse – though we've got a PS4 hidden in a bomb shelter just in case.



RESIDENT EVIL 2

Format PS4, XO, PC **ETA** January 2019
A remake of one of the original PlayStation's greatest games has us all aquiver. The improvements aren't just to the graphics, you know.



SPYRO REIGNITED TRILOGY

Format PS4, XO **ETA** 13 November
Mr Plucky-In-Purple is holding firm at fifth. If the Crash remake's anything to go by, we estimate this is set to sell upwards of three gajillion copies.

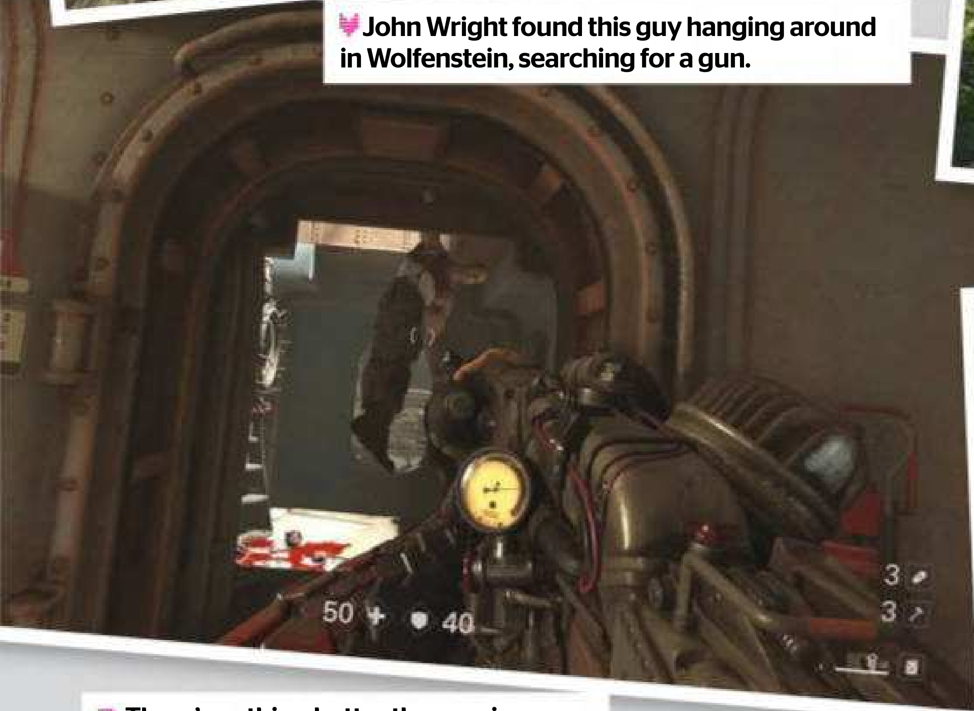
YOU LOVE GAMES

Cool stuff and videogame culture


Forza Horizon 4 delivered this lovely Lake District view to James Mossop, who must have got his tyres wet taking it.


"Let's have some gorgeous mobile screenshots for a change" says Damian Gale, offering this from Project Off Road.


Marvel's Spider-Man is proving popular with screenshot artists, including this from Dan Kornish.


John Wright found this guy hanging around in Wolfenstein, searching for a gun.

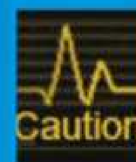

Franki Halliwell says she's 'eternally in awe' of Shadow Of The Tomb Raider.


According to the email it arrived on, a two-year-old named Rosa Sade took this Shadow Of The Tomb Raider shot, which makes us suspect parental shenanigans.


There's nothing better than seeing GTA V from the air, as this shot from Robert Artiman, aged 19, proves.

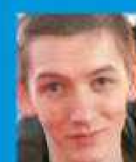
SOCIAL GROUSING

Wisdom and weirdness from our bustling social media channels



Let's be honest, @GamesMaster was the king.

Orange Caution, @orangecaution

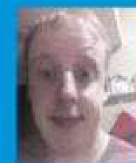

Why 'when you were younger'? Was collecting @GamesMaster as a kid and still read them while in my thirties. Great mag.

Leigh Way, @LA_Way


The mag is still going strong today and it looks amazing

SUPERNERDSUK_gaming, @SNUKgaming

[*cries* Thanks, guys!]


Arkham Knight/City are the best combat games when it comes to superheroes.

They almost make me want to dig out my bat-suit, start looking for the copies of the Batman: Dark Tomorrow game while shouting 'WHERE ARE THEY!?!'

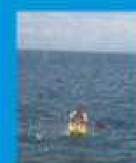
Daniel Climo, Facebook


My fave game is every single game that ever existed!!! Play on people!

Monica Kershaw, Facebook


I do like the stealthy elements of Assassin's Creed

Jen McBatcat, Facebook


SPEAK TO MEEEEEE

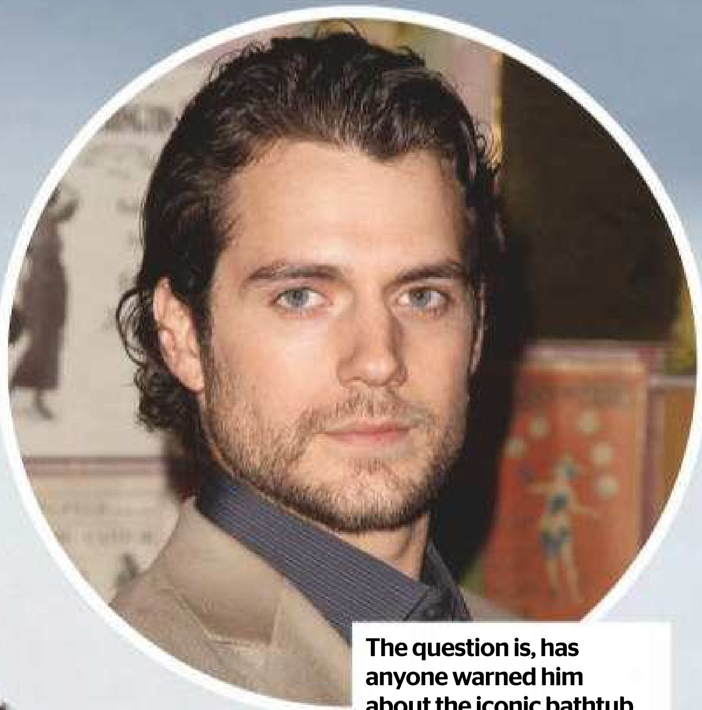
SeanGabriel, @SeanGabriel83

We're not sure if Cavill's old enough to carry off the role, but at least we know he can rock a chin full of stubble.

TRISS AND TELL

Netflix accepts a task worthy of Geralt himself: to make a great **The Witcher** TV show

In the Netflix series, as in the games and books, Geralt's horse is named Roach. Why? No idea. He never explains.

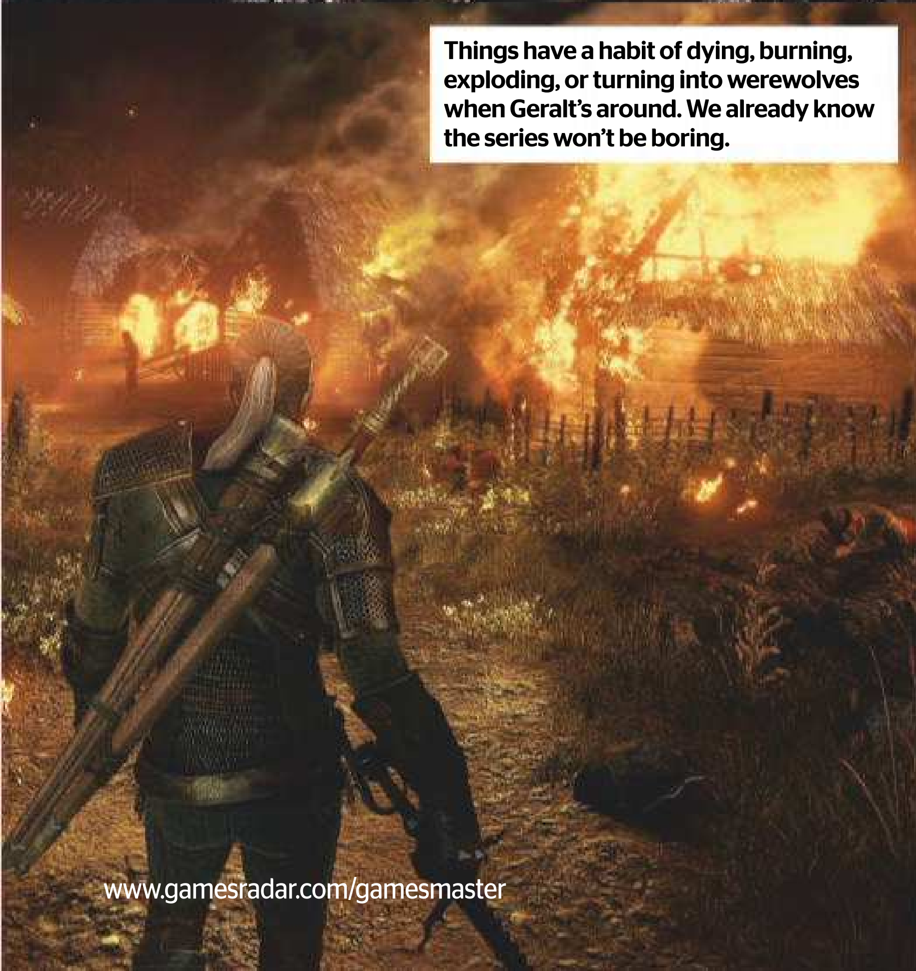


The question is, has anyone warned him about the iconic bathtub scene? Our pals at PC Gamer will be distraught if it's not in the show.



After Geralt, fans were concerned about the casting of Ciri and Yennefer – but it looks fine.





Things have a habit of dying, burning, exploding, or turning into werewolves when Geralt's around. We already know the series won't be boring.



The Witcher 3 is one of the greatest games ever, and if you haven't played it yet, you ought to remedy that. It looks amazing, and has a fantastic script worthy of Andrzej Sapkowski's original short stories and novels. Titular monster hunter Geralt and his world have previously been seen in movie and TV form, via a series and film both known in English as The Hexer, but opinion on these is divided. Netflix aims to do better with its in-development series, details of Witcher now starting to come out.

Due some time in 2019, there will be eight episodes, four of which are to be directed by Alik "ooh, he directed some of Game Of Thrones" Sakharov. Plot details are understandably thin on the ground, although a script leak temporarily sent some fans on the rampage. In the snippets that escaped onto the internet, Geralt and Yennefer were constantly swapping wisecracks, leading to fears that the show wouldn't stay true to the characters. Showrunner Lauren Schmidt Hissrich (whose writing credits include Daredevil and The West Wing) swiftly took to Twitter to assure people that, while real, the script extracts were written specifically for auditions – and were *not* representative of the finished product.

Speaking of auditions, who's playing who? Well, we know (thanks to The Hollywood Reporter) that Geralt Of Rivia himself will be played by… Henry Cavill. Yes, that bloke who was in an episode of Midsomer Murders once (oh, and apparently he's played the part of some 'Superman' person in a few movies). Not *our* first choice – that would obviously be silver fox, and Geralt lookalike, Paul 'Bake Off' Hollywood – but it'll be interesting to see how he plays the role.

"PLOT DETAILS ARE THIN ON THE GROUND, ALTHOUGH A SCRIPT LEAK SENT SOME FANS ON THE RAMPAGE"

Bewitchering beauty

Meanwhile, the actress who must have impressed the most with the sassy scripts that worried fans is Anya Chalotra (seen playing the similarly-named Jennifer in Wanderlust), who's playing Yennefer. Ciri will be played by Freya Allan (The War Of The Worlds mini-series). Other confirmed cast members include Jodhi May as Queen Calanthe, and Adam Levy as the druid Mousesack. Yes, Mousesack.

If your nerves still aren't settled from the leaked script excerpts, rest easy knowing that Sapkowski himself is on board as a creative consultant. It's also been revealed that the show will be shooting in 'Eastern Europe', which *surely* means at least in part in Poland, the birthplace of the Witcher franchise (or "Wiedźmin" to give it its original name). Also: Roach confirmed! We're on track for an authentic Witcher experience.

Don't expect the series to lift anything directly from the games though, as Hissrich says that "the videogames are the sole visual representation of these stories, and we needed to create our own visual representation". Don't tell her about the existing film and TV series, eh? Still, she's shown enormous enthusiasm for the project, and we're excited to see what she does with it. Who wouldn't be? Freeing the TV version from the games is a clever move as they's have a tough time matching up.

Netflix may have a patchy track record with its original programming (*cough*Iron Fist*cough*), but when it's good, it's *brilliant*. If it manages to mess this up even with Sapkowski's involvement, it'll look very Ciri indeed. ■

HURLEY ACCESS
ADVENTURES IN EARLY ACCESS
With your host... LEON HURLEY

POOPER TROOPER

Staying alive in Scum, a game of survival and bodily functions

Scum is an open world survival game about prisoners condemned to fight, scavenge, and craft their way across a massive island. Think Rust or Ark as you try to stay alive long enough to be the most dangerous thing on the server – although you've probably heard of the game because it lets you control your bodily functions. We condemned Leon to hard time testing what it can really do-do.



0 MINUTES

I'm not sure what worries me more as I fire up Scum for the first time and begin to build a character – the stern-looking setup of stat points and sliders that defines my skills, or the haunted look on the face of the man I'm creating. It's a face that has apparently already *seen things*. Perhaps that's why he's in chokey, eh? The whole time I'm moving numbers around to define his ability to fight, run, and just generally stay alive he looks at me, dead-eyed, his expression conveying zero confidence in my ability to help him survive the prison zone he's imminently going to be abandoned in. I'm guessing he may have read earlier Hurley Accesses. Nonetheless, I kit him out as best I can and hit the 'go' button. The game tells me he's guilty of arson, and fires him into whatever hell awaits.



30 MINUTES

Because this is a survival crafting game I start punching the nearest tree as soon as I arrive, and it comes as a shock when that doesn't actually let me make a wooden axe to cut down more trees. For a little while I'm not sure what to do; it's *always* been punching trees. Minecraft, Rust... everything starts with punching trees, and you work your way up from there. For a little while I wander in a forest, not sure what to do, until I realise I can search the ground for rocks. That soon gives me a stone knife and *then* I can start hitting trees. Before long that gets me some sticks, and from there a simple wooden spear. I've basically won the game already. I also manage to craft some rope but my options are otherwise limited, so I find a town on the map and, pointy stick at the ready, head that way.



45 MINUTES

I've completely forgotten I'm playing on a public server until I hear some distant gunshots. Suddenly I'm having DayZ/H1Z1-style flashbacks – two other survival games that taught me what people are really like in things like this. There are no nice guys here. Somewhere out there is a player with all the best gear, just waiting to find fresh meat like me to destroy. I can hear machine guns trading fire, and no matter how much I whittle this lovely stick to a fine point, I'm basically a tea-bagging waiting to happen if I'm not careful. It doesn't matter whether I have any loot (hint: do you think I'd be making do with a stick if I did?), no-one here will let me live if they see me. I slow down, crouch, and carefully make my way towards the town. The guns don't sound too close, so I head to the buildings and take the risk.



1 HOUR

The town sort of pays off. As I explore I find clothes and a shovel. Before long I'm dressed less like a prisoner and I am ready to *garden*. There's also a weird grumbly, growling noise I keep hearing as I move from room to room, searching drawers and crates. At first I think it might be my stomach – I haven't eaten since the game began and I could be starving – but no, it's zombies. There are *ZOMBIES*. I learn a lot in the next few minutes. Mainly things like just how hard it is to kill a zombie with a small shovel. Some determined flailing later, however, and it dies... again, and I'm the proud owner of some new boots and jeans that no-one must ever know I peeled off the body of a decaying corpse I just bludgeoned to death.



1 HOUR 15 MINUTES

The zombie has at least taught me more about Scum's slightly terrifying approach to health. While health, stamina, energy, and hydration are all on the main screen, there's a another that looks like something Formula One mechanics might use. There's a full break down of nutrition – from calorie intake to vitamins and minerals, and even how full my colon and bladder are. I found some cheese in a cupboard earlier, so I'm currently 98% cheese according to this, a state I'd like to achieve in real life. I need to look after myself more, as I'm both starving, even with the cheese, and in phase one of sickness, which means I need more food and something to cure my illness.



1 HOUR 30 MINUTES

One plus point as I struggle to survive, fight zombies, and work out how to make an axe is that Scum gives me the greatest gift a survival game can bestow: storage. As I find clothes to replace my prisoner's gear, I get more and more spaces to cram stone knives and tinned peaches into. At one point I even find boots I can put things in. The real win, though, is finding a bum bag and child's rucksack. That might not sound like much, but it feels like I'm living like a king now I don't have to worry about dropping medicine to pick up some rocks. Yes sir, in this sort of game money means nothing; the real treasure comes in the form of a pair of cargo trousers with extra pockets.



1 HOUR 45 MINUTES

So far, my existence has been minute-to-minute. Apart from all the zombie avoiding, I've mainly been eating everything and anything I can find to keep my energy up and avoid starvation. It hasn't been a great diet, mainly consisting of fizzy drinks and a bag of sugar. The nearest I've got to healthy for a while is a tin of peaches. It all catches up with me when another of Scum's bodily features kicks in. I've not been following my metabolism for a while but apparently it's time to... go. I know this because my character suddenly stops, pulls down his trousers, and sh... cra... p... It's not pretty, and I wish I wasn't so close to the screen. All I can think of is how I really want to wash my hands, and that I hope no-one kills me at that precise moment.



2 HOURS

Despite the... incident... I'm feeling pretty confident. I've crafted a metal spear and have supplies stuffed in every space I can find, so when I spy some sort of facility in the distance I decide to risk it. It looks military, which means danger but also guns, and I need something more than a knife on a stick. However, while my biggest fear is other people, it turns out what I should have been worried about was the MASSIVE MECHS PATROLLING THE PLACE. Despite my best efforts one sees me, and chases me up onto a silo roof. On the plus side it can't get me any more, but the sniper in the trees can. The sniper I learn about via the hail of bullets that kills me way faster than I would like. Not that I have a preferred speed of death, but you know what I mean.

SENTENCE SERVED

Despite the zombies and mechs there's a pleasingly grounded feel to Scum as you try to balance nutrition, disease, and trying to stay alive. Its bodily functions are gimmicky, but beyond that it's surprisingly deep, with RPG elements expanded by sim-like character creation. Stronger people can carry more, for example, but use more energy. The skills and abilities mean there is an in-depth survival game here, one in which who you are is just as important as what you pick up, and the ability to fine-tune a character's skills, and grow them, is an interesting change to the usual race to collect the best gear. While the learning curve is steep, there's a lot to work with already.



Change your PSN ID, then take your new, less embarrassing alter ego online to crush your enemies!



Perhaps you chose an ID that's unfunny and/or doesn't make sense. Er, not that we'd know about that...



This is where you'll go to change your ID once switching's available.

NOT A ONE-TRICK SONY

For the players (especially ones unhappy with their IDs)

Sony has been busy on the announcement front, revealing something that people have been demanding for years, and confirming something that people have strongly suspected for months. In the 'please, console Santa' corner, we have the ability to change your PSN ID – from the comfort of your console, no less.

If you're happy with your PSN ID, great – just enjoy the fact that the option will be there if you need it! But spare a thought, too, for the people stuck with IDs that really, *really* weren't the great idea they seemed at the time, and who've been desperate for a way to change for years now. If you're a Mrk00lGuy5768798797, an ULtrakilla618, or something rude-sounding that we're not going to try to print, hope is on the horizon.

The feature will be doled out (via the PlayStation Preview Program) to select users who previously signed up for PS4 software betas until the end of November, rolling out to everybody in early 2019. The first name change is free, but every change after that will cost you £7.99 (£3.99 for PS Plus members), presumably to stop people swapping every time the wind changes.

Change days

When you change, you can choose to display your previous ID alongside your new one to help people recognise you – though, oddly, this decision is an irreversible one. It's also worth noting that only PS4 games published after 1 April 2018 are guaranteed to be compatible. The PlayStation Blog post that announced the feature notes that while most popular games should be fine, "users may occasionally encounter issues or errors in certain games". You'll be able to go back to your original ID for free, though.

Elsewhere, surprising few and pleasing many, the development of the PS5 was in effect confirmed by Sony CEO Kenichiro Yoshida. Speaking to the Financial Times, he said: "What I can say is it's necessary to have a next-generation hardware". He didn't give any details beyond that, but we know one thing for sure: it's happening. ■



"YOU CAN DISPLAY YOUR PREVIOUS ID ALONGSIDE YOUR NEW ONE TO HELP PEOPLE RECOGNISE YOU"







Just think. Thanks to Microsoft, this could be *you* in the near future. Wearing a cream cardigan. Imagine that!

I STREAM OF GENIUS

Microsoft's thinking outside the Xbox with its streaming project

We've always loved videogames here at GamesMaster (as you might have guessed). We've always loved silly names, too. Microsoft's bringing the two together with Project xCloud – hooray! The industry still has a long way to go if it's to prove that streaming is the future, but this development is interesting, if nothing else.

Bouncing around on lots of puffed-up PR phrases such as "empowered", "gaming experience", and "minimal footprint", Microsoft's announcement revealed that it's currently testing a system that will bring Xbox games to a wide variety of devices. The idea is that players will be able to access their games on Xbox One, PC… or their mobile devices such as phones and tablets. All thanks to the power of streaming.

If you fancy playing Halo on your tablet or Forza on your phone, you can either use a wireless Xbox controller via Bluetooth, or use touchscreen controls. The latter option has always been rather awkward on mobile devices, but

"PLAYERS WILL BE ABLE TO ACCESS THEIR GAMES ON XBOX ONE, PC… OR MOBILE DEVICES SUCH AS PHONES"



Steering with touchscreen controls? Hmm, not sure. But Microsoft is convinced it can make that work.

Microsoft claims it has something special up its collective sleeve for this.

Blue sky thinking

The system relies on the cloud computing service Microsoft Azure. Already globally established – "with datacentres in 54 Azure regions and services available in 140 countries" – a big chunk of the important work is already done, though we'll still be at the mercy of our broadband providers (and that's the reason why Switch streaming is currently confined to Japan, which has super-speedy connections) so Microsoft will have to overcome that for its streaming service to succeed. It's promised that latency will be way down, while frame rates and general graphical loveliness will be way up.

Some lovely promises, then, but whether they're delivered remains to be seen. While there are questions about how games companies will be paid, and what this means for DLC, Microsoft has enough devs in-house to start with its own games. If anyone can do it, surely a company as big as Microsoft can. ■

A subtle shift in art style brought TWD: The Final Season closer to the comic books in look. It remains to be seen whether Clem's journey will be fully completed.

UNHAPPY ENDING

The tragedy of Telltale Games: how a pioneer of interactive storytelling became another industry casualty

Even by Telltale's standards, the final twist was shocking. This studio of storytellers had, after all, seemed back to its best. Batman: The Enemy Within was considered a vast improvement on the disappointing first season. The Walking Dead: The Final Season, the last bow for the studio's best-loved character, Clementine, had got off to a stellar start. And yet, on 21 September 2018, four days before the release of its second episode, rumours quickly became reality: Telltale released a statement announcing a "majority closure" and the loss of 250 jobs. Though it said it would retain a skeleton staff of just 25 employees – in theory, to finish its episodic collaboration with Netflix, an adaptation of the studio's Minecraft: Story Mode – it was, to all intents and purposes, the end of Telltale Games.

Steadily, details behind the closure began to emerge. Ultimately, the axe fell as a result of several big-money deals falling through. Having invested a significant sum in a proposed live-action interactive collaboration, entertainment company Lionsgate withdrew its funding. And when both TV channel AMC and South Korean game company Smilegate also pulled out, Telltale found itself with no other option. Its deal with Netflix – which was set to include a future game based on sci-fi throwback Stranger Things – was not enough to save the studio.

'Tale's end

The 250 affected staff were told to leave immediately, with no severance pay, and barely over a week's worth of health insurance left. The development community, led by Telltale's newly laid-off narrative designer Emily Grace Buck, rallied round, sharing details of positions on social media to find jobs for all those who'd lost theirs, including several new staff who had only just relocated to California. A job fair was organised specifically for Telltale staff. Meanwhile, The Walking Dead: The Final Season was essentially left in limbo: the second episode came out as planned, but notably without including a preview for the following chapter. The story introduced several new threads, which were obviously designed to pay off later down the line – clear evidence that no

> "ULTIMATELY THE AXE FELL AS A RESULT OF SEVERAL BIG-MONEY DEALS FALLING THROUGH"





No end of Days

Survival game lives up to its genre

As Telltale began to make it big, it moved into the world of publishing, releasing the likes of Straandlooper's scabrously funny graphic adventure Hector: Badge Of Carnage and Oxenfree developer Night School Studio's brilliant Mr Robot tie-in on mobile. But two recently-published games potentially face uncertain futures: the console versions of Beam Team Games' open-world survival game Stranded Deep will now be delayed at the very least, with its initial October release date already having been missed. However, another open-world survival game, 7 Days To Die, is set to continue, with developer The Fun Pimps confirming its ongoing commitment to supporting the game.



Minecraft: Story Mode stuck to Telltale's usual template, but was a hit with younger audiences, spawning a second season last year.

one, at least on the creative side, had seen this coming.

Yet with hindsight, the news hadn't quite come entirely out of the blue. There had already been a number of layoffs in November 2017 with around 90 staff (essentially a quarter of Telltale's workforce) let go. In March, meanwhile, a damning expose from The Verge reported that the studio's best talent had been consistently drifting away, disillusioned with crunch conditions and executive-level demands. Sean Vanaman and Jake Rodkin, the two lead writers of The Walking Dead's critically-acclaimed first season, had long since left to found their own studio, Campo Santo (whose own game, Firewatch, was one of a number of narrative-led games Telltale now found itself competing against) and they were just the start.

Then came the almost unfathomable reports – albeit citing anonymous sources – that, of the studio's recent output, only The Walking Dead's first season and Minecraft: Story Mode had been profitable. It seems hard to believe, though it's true that Telltale had grown significantly since The Walking Dead without coming close to matching its commercial success. Strong competition from other narrative-led games (Dontnod's Life Is Strange being the most prominent example) was a likely factor. Meanwhile, the demands of creating episodes to a tight schedule meant that the studio struggled to match the benchmark for quality it had set with The Walking Dead. The Wolf Among Us was just the first game to suffer delays to its release schedule, while the studio's dogged insistence on sticking with its bespoke engine caused technical problems, particularly on console. And by 2014's adaptation of fantasy epic Game Of Thrones, the Telltale formula was beginning to feel decidedly stale: since The Walking Dead, all of its stories had been shoehorned into a one-size-fits-all template that, well, wasn't exactly a snug fit for all the franchises it had acquired. It had, quite simply, spread itself too thinly, with its bosses believing that simply staffing up was the solution. By 2017's Guardians Of The Galaxy: The Telltale Series, Telltale was hitting its episodic schedules, but it now had around 400 employees. Something had to give, and so it proved.

While the Telltale story is, in the end, a cautionary one, it began 14 years ago with a wave of optimism. Troy Molander, Dan Connors, and Kevin Bruner, a trio who had worked together at LucasArts,

founded the company with the aim of continuing their former employer's legacy in episodic form. In fact, it hoped to achieve that with the help of a detective duo familiar to LucasArts fans: Sam & Max. Owing to a squabble over the rights to the game, Telltale built a Texas hold'em game and two titles based on Jeff Smith's comic book Bone, plus the first of three episodic games based on the CSI TV series for Ubisoft, before it obtained the rights to Sam & Max from original creator Steve Purcell. Purcell helped co-write and direct Sam & Max Save The World, which saw monthly releases between October 2006 and April 2007. A funny, albeit fairly conventional, point-and-click adventure, very much in the LucasArts mould, it was warmly received and sold well enough for Telltale to release a sequel one year later, and then a third game in 2010.

Monkey business

Telltale's apparent desire to become the new LucasArts had a lot to do with the old LucasArts. Many of the latter company's staff had now jumped ship, including, notably, Dave Grossman, co-designer of some of LucasArts' best-loved games. Over the next five or six years Telltale made a name for itself as the new custodian of the adventure genre. Strong Bad's Cool Game For Attractive People, based on web comic Homestar Runner, came next, before Telltale teamed up with Aardman for Wallace & Gromit's Grand Adventures. It raided the LucasArts vaults one more time in 2009 with Tales Of Monkey Island, the first new entry in the series since Escape From Monkey Island, nine years before.

By now, Telltale had settled into a groove and was attracting wider attention. It struck a deal with NBC Universal to produce two more episodic games, based on Back To The Future and Jurassic Park. The former was the more successful of the two, attracting Christopher Lloyd to reprise his role as Doc Brown, while Bob Gale, co-creator of the films, earned a writing credit for the game's story. Jurassic Park, by contrast, was widely panned – and yet in some ways it was the more important of the two releases. It focused much more on story over puzzles, featured a final decision that determined the game's ending, and had action sequences based around quick-time events. In other words, Telltale was beginning to experiment with the narrative template that would soon bring the studio its biggest hit.

Having inked a deal with Skybound to produce an episodic series based on Robert Kirkman's The Walking Dead comic books, Telltale assembled a talented team, including Jake Rodkin and Sean Vanaman, alongside Rogue One/ The Book Of Eli writer Gary Whitta.

At first, The Walking Dead threw a few bones to Telltale's point-and-click audience, with rudimentary puzzles to solve, but in many other ways it followed Jurassic Park's lead, prioritising story over systems. It differed from that game in two main ways: a series of tough moral choices would allow the player to shape the narrative; and, more





Guardians Of The Galaxy wasn't as successful as you'd expect a Marvel game to be. Would more promotion have helped this one?

Tallest Tales

Six of the best: the studio's finest games



Sam & Max Beyond Time and Space

The second of Telltale's outings for the wisecracking rabbit and his straight-dog partner made the first look like a dry run. It was funnier, better looking, and the last couple of episodes were minor classics.



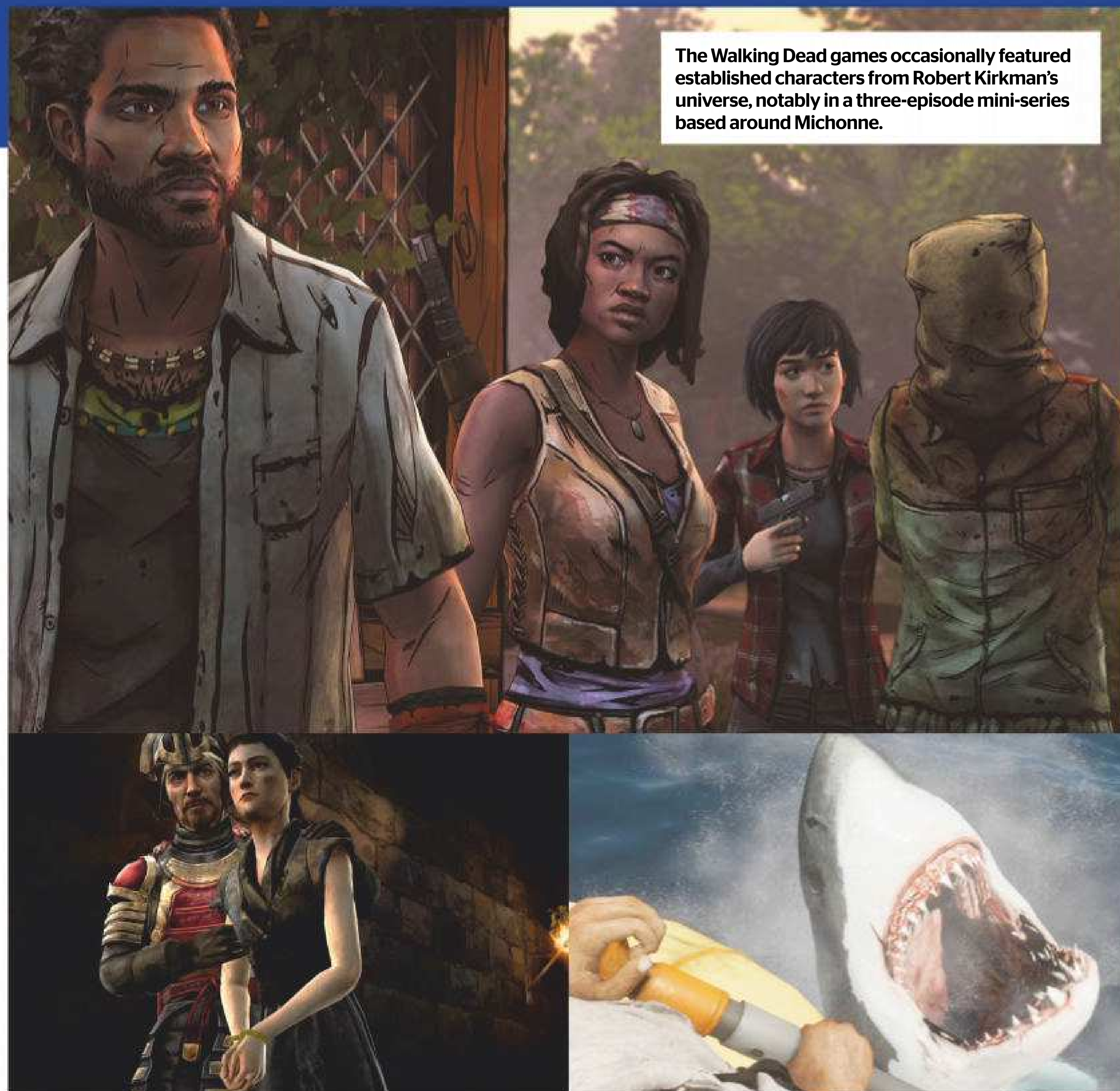
Nelson Tethers: Puzzle Agent

Combining black humour with Lynchian weirdness, this dialogue-led puzzler (which emerged from an internal pilot programme) might well be the studio's most underrated game. Not a big hit, but a winner in our book.



Back To The Future: The Game

Capturing the breezy, anarchic spirit of the films, this essentially marked the end of Old Telltale before it started doing things differently. But as a farewell to the point-and-click, it could hardly have been better.



The Walking Dead games occasionally featured established characters from Robert Kirkman's universe, notably in a three-episode mini-series based around Michonne.

importantly, the writing and characterisation was far superior.

Telling the story of a teacher-turned-convict and the young girl who becomes his surrogate daughter, The Walking Dead was an instant hit – partly thanks to the success of the TV series, although many suggested the game's storytelling was better than the show's. Either way, the burgeoning father-daughter relationship at the core of the game won players over, and the series became Telltale's biggest hit to date. The choices and their different outcomes turned each episode into a watercooler moment, and the series subsequently won a hatful of awards, ultimately helping usher in a new wave of narrative-led games.

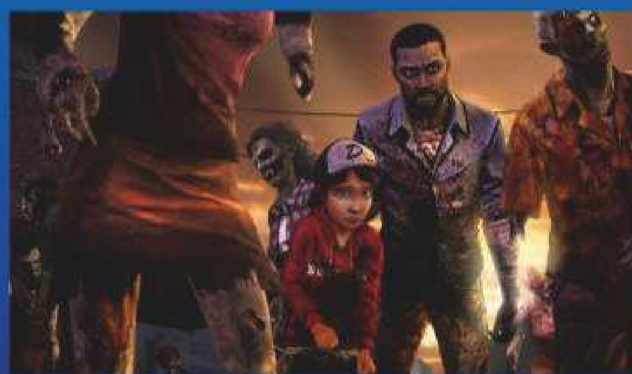
Everything seemed to be going well for Telltale, as it stuck with comics for its next project, albeit with a lesser-known name: Bill Willingham's Fables, a story about fairytale characters eking out an existence in New York. Visually, The Wolf Among Us was an improvement on The Walking Dead, with its noirish use of shadow juxtaposed with saturated colour. However, with a second season of The Walking Dead being made concurrently, frequent episode delays demonstrated that Telltale was already having difficulties managing two projects at once. Regardless, this dark, twisted tale ended up as a cult favourite. Meanwhile, with Clementine promoted to the lead role, The Walking Dead: Season Two was another triumph – if not as popular as the first with either critics or audiences.

Writers' blocks

Telltale dipped into comedy for its next big project: Tales From The Borderlands offered a fresh, funny take on Gearbox's RPG. The studio released its first kid-friendly game since its move away from point-and-click with 2015's Minecraft: Story Mode, using the world and blocky art style of Mojang's mega-hit for a witty but uneven adventure – it was clear there were problems with the story when five episodes became eight, though this may well have been partly down to commercial considerations, since it was the studio's biggest hit for some time. Otherwise, the studio was still attracting major names without achieving the sales to match. Game Of Thrones failed to capture the imagination of the show's fans, and despite a consistent monthly schedule and a new engine, Batman: The Telltale Series was a flop. Even the cast-iron Marvel brand took a hit with its adaptation of Guardians Of The Galaxy, which seemed to suffer as much as anything from a lack of promotion.

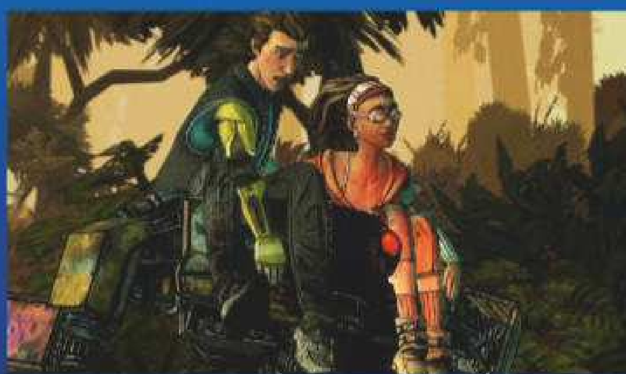
"WE CAN ONLY HOPE THE WALKING DEAD'S CLEMENTINE HAS A HAPPIER ENDING THAN HER MAKERS"

After last year's layoffs, new CEO Pete Hawley promised a focus on quality over quantity, with the studio taking on fewer but potentially more lucrative projects. Its deal with Netflix seemed to be just the start: at the time of writing, its adaptation of Minecraft: Story Mode still appears to be going ahead, though the studio's adaptation of Stranger Things won't see the light of day – Netflix says it's exploring other options to bring that to fruition. In the meantime, Robert Kirkman's company, Skybound, has reportedly reached a deal with Telltale to finish Clementine's story, apparently "with members of the original team" – though as yet it's unclear how that might happen. Either way, we can only hope Clementine has a happier ending than her makers. ■



The Walking Dead: Season One

The studio's defining moment: a game that established a distinctive new brand of interactive storytelling. A tough, gut-wrenching drama with real tension and tears, it set a standard even Telltale has found difficult to match.



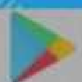
Tales From The Borderlands

Reinvigorating a by-then familiar template, this inventive, laugh-out-loud funny romp only found a niche audience, but if TWD is considered the pinnacle of the studio's achievements, many would put this a close second.



Batman: The Enemy Within

Almost unrecognisable from the underwhelming first season, this follow-up worked best as a fascinating new origin story for The Joker, wrapping up an absorbing adventure with one of Telltale's strongest endings.

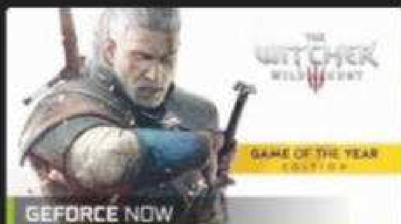

Google Play Store

Google Play Movies & TV
NETFLIX

Google Play Games

TAKE AIM
PRECISION OPINIONS!

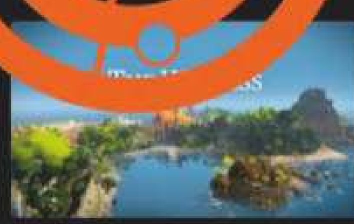
Games





















"Streaming services are not going to replace physical games"

The future of gaming doesn't lie at the mercy of our internet service providers, says Benjamin Burns, because people will still love hardware

Ubisoft CEO and co-founder and Yves Guillemot recently stated that in the future "game streaming will replace all gaming platforms". He's not alone in that sentiment, with Microsoft working on a standalone streaming device codenamed 'Project Scarlett'. I'm not going to waste your time by listing everything that could go wrong in a streaming-only future. Just try watching Netflix on a countryside bus service and you'll become an expert. I will, however, stake my non-existent reputation on the fact that this is all total bobbins. Streaming services are not going to replace physical games, at least not any time soon. Here's why.

When I game, I do it on wired gear. My keyboard and mouse are both wired, as are the controllers for most of my consoles. I never connect to the internet wirelessly on a gaming machine if I can help it and I install my most competitive PC games to my SSD. All of this is intended to reduce the huge drag factor of how much I suck at games. Those extra milliseconds that I gain from being all wired up are crucial on the field of battle because, as I march ever onwards towards my 30s, my reactions aren't what they used to be.

Hot, streamy love

I imagine that statement will have elicited one of two responses from you. You're either thinking I'm some sort of sad act, trailing as many wires around his living room as possible in order to win games of Overwatch, or you're nodding in understanding because you do it too. Both reactions are fair, but my point is that the latter group of people exists, and while that continues to be the case, there's a whole load of us who aren't going to accept streaming as a viable option.

While game development is undeniably an art, it's also a business, and any move that threatens to alienate such a vast quantity of the target audience isn't going to find traction very easily. We've also got to take into account the fact that most significant innovations come to PC long before they make it to consoles, and the PC market is made up of hardware enthusiasts. Neither the guys who like to build gaming rigs, nor the companies that sell them their components, are going to be eager to jump on board with a future that makes them both irrelevant. Perhaps it'll be a console-only thing, but do we really want to go back to a time when the PC provided a vastly superior experience to consoles? I know I don't.

Perhaps one day some pundit will be laughing at us all for being such luddites. Maybe the internet of the near future will be leaps and bounds ahead of what we have now. But there's one thing I'm absolutely certain of - we're not ready for an industry based around streaming. ■

> "THERE'S A WHOLE LOAD OF US WHO AREN'T GOING TO ACCEPT STREAMING AS AN OPTION"

STATS MAGIC The gaming month in facts and figures

25mbps
The internet download speed you'll need to stream triple-A games to any device using Google's Project Stream. Oh, and you'll need to live in the US too, for now.

1 in 10
The unusually high proportion of players who collected all the trophies in Marvel's Spider-Man in the month after release.

2.5 hrs
The time it took the How Big Is The Map? YouTube channel to walk from one end of AC Odyssey's map to the other.

1,000
The number of V-bucks you'll get if you purchase the Fortnite Deep Freeze Bundle on console, which also comes with an ice-themed outfit and axe. Yours for £25.





"Turning in mid-air to snap Avengers Tower feels like peak Spider-Man"

Marvel's Spider-Man's carefully thought-out and modelled collectibles made a completionist of Benjamin Griffin. Now smile for the camera!

Few tasks are more menial than sniffing out videogame collectibles. These useless items serve no purpose than to artificially inflate a game's length. In the case of Marvel's Spider-Man, however, I'm determinedly tracking down the lot.

Throughout New York, Spider-Man's webbed 55 of his old backpacks to buildings (hey, he had a little time on his hands), and each one contains a nostalgic memento: his bulky first web-shooter; a vial containing the Sandman's dastardly grains; a business card bearing the details of ace lawyer Matt Murdock, who you might also know as Daredevil. You're uncovering Spider-Man's history with each bag you bring in.

Selecting any of these collectibles prompts a line from Spider-Man. "A toy designer made this prototype to get me to license my likeness," he says of a plushie. "Too bad there's no way to get paid without revealing my identity." Then there's the self-help book titled 'Work/Life Balance For Idiots', which would help the famously tardy superhero, "If I ever find time to read it."

Objets d'heart

Developer Insomniac created fully rotatable 3D models for each collectible, and the loving attention to detail shows. Turn the Kingpin's special spice towards the light and you'll make out greasy fingerprints across the cap. Look closely at the menu saved from Peter and MJ's first date and you can peruse dishes right down to the baked lasagna. When this much care's been put into in-game collectibles, you'll make the effort to collect them.

Only in this game it never feels like effort. Take another collectible, landmarks, which you record with Parker's camera. True to form, he's got a quip for each one. "I wonder if king T'Challa got his powers from being bitten by a radioactive panther," he remarks outside the Wakandan embassy. Web-slinging down a busy boulevard before turning in mid-air to snap a passing shot of Avengers Tower or Doctor Strange's house in slow motion feels like peak Spider-Man. Even if your actual shot is a blurry mess, Parker always digs it, and that enthusiasm is infectious.

Your in-flight entertainment during all this comes courtesy of J. Jonah Jameson, former Daily Bugle editor and bile-spewing host of a rant-filled podcast featuring sound bites like, "You know what I blame? The internet. Except the part of the internet that carries my show." And as an extra incentive to hunt collectibles, you're gaining XP every time your feet leave the floor, whether you're wall-running, slingshotting, or swan-diving directly through a flock of baffled pigeons.

Our time on this Earth is limited, but due to the way Insomniac couples collectibles to backstory and makes reaching them fun and meaningful, I'm happy to spend a large part of it 100%-ing Marvel's Spider-Man. ■

> "WHEN THIS MUCH CARE IS PUT INTO COLLECTIBLES, YOU'LL MAKE THE EFFORT TO COLLECT THEM"

GM MOST WANTED

What's most tickling the team's *fancy this month*





IAN'S PICK

Hitman 2

People around the office know that I'm neither a quiet nor subtle man, but there's a thrill to be had in becoming the thing you are not. Hitman 2 looks to provide this thrill, with the jungle-set levels we've seen providing the perfect playground for poisonings and a lovely locale for liquidation. There's something about 47's precise and confident approach to whacking on a chef's hat and immediately being taken for a chef that we could all learn from – though perhaps in real life we shouldn't dress as a policeman and try directing traffic.

PS4, XO, PC - 13 November



ROB'S PICK

Battlefield V

Although Cyberpunk 2077 is my long-term most wanted, in the short term my heart belongs to Battlefield V. I'm so excited to get my hands on it I can hardly contain myself. Having played the beta, and enjoyed the socks off it, I'm looking forward to getting into a squad with my mates to dominate the battlefield. Now's there's added depth to the weapon loadouts, this is sure to keep us gripped for months... HO!

PS4, XO, PS3, 360, PC - 20 November



DLC TLC

11-11: Memories Retold looks utterly beautiful, if a game about war could be said to be such a thing, and we're anticipating a good degree of heartstring-tugging from it. Bandai Namco has announced it's going to release a DLC following two children drawn into the events of World War I. All the profits from the DLC will go to War Child UK, a charity supporting children affected by war.



HISTORY LESSON

Here's a museum we'd happily spend a night in: the National Videogame Museum is opening in Sheffield on 24 November. It's home to the only permanently accessible collection of videogame memorabilia in the UK – get down there and be all cultured!



GO WEST

Ever looked at a game's nuclear-blighted wasteland and thought, "I really must go there"? Well, the West Virginia Tourist Office is partnering with Bethesda to promote both Fallout 76 and West Virginia as a tourist destination. It's wacky, but we admit we'd happily visit…



SENUA STUDIES

Ninja Theory is continuing to support mental health work in the wake of the success of Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice. Now the developer has announced Senua's scholarship, helping to fund a student training in mental health care at Cambridge Recovery College East so they can work towards a professional qualification. Brilliant work, Ninja Theory!

Topping the leaderboard this issue



YOU WIN

YOU LOSE



No, we don't want to continue thanks



STRICTLY A FIB

The BBC released a video of contestants in this year's Strictly Come Dancing pulling off some moves from Fortnite, and tweeted "Press play tonight 6.40pm". However, if anyone tuned in hoping to see more, they were sadly disappointed as the show didn't have a Fortnite or videogame theme. Still, at least it means Nan won't get ideas and attempt to Floss or Infinite Dab at the next family do, eh?



RED DEAD TIRED

Rockstar's Dan Houser recently revealed the Red Dead Redemption 2 team worked 100-hour weeks several times in 2018 – and this isn't the first time the firm has been linked to staff working long hours. As eager as we are to play the game, we don't want it at the expense of the devs' health and social lives. We don't want any game at that price. Games companies, look after your staff, okay? You need them!



GAME OVER

By the time you read this, Sony will have shut down the servers for three PS3 titles: Twisted Metal, Warhawk, and PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale. It means you'll no longer be able to play them online or access any online content for them. We were surprised a game where Sackboy could give Kratos a complete pasting wasn't as popular as it could've been when it launched, but it lingered on for quite some time.



BANTASTIC

Reddit user sjk045 put together posts from PUBG developer Bluehole to work out how many PUBG accounts have been banned to date for "unauthorised use of illegal programs", and came up with the staggering figure of 13 *million*. That's not 13 million cheaters, of course; plenty may be people who've returned to the game after a ban and been caught cheating again. Still a lot of cheats, though. Git gud, y'all…

THE GM TO DO LIST

Crucial dates for your gaming diary. If you only do one thing this month, eat, but otherwise make a note of these events...


05/11

DIE FAWKES

It's Bonfire Night, so play something appropriate – how about Dark Souls?


13/11

RELIGHT YOUR FIRE

And keep that gaming flame burning: Spyro Reignited Trilogy launches today.



13/11

GUARANTEED HIT

Make your stealthy way down to the shops to take out a copy of Hitman 2, out today.

14/11

FALLOUT BELTER

Leave your bunker to snap up today's big release, Fallout 76. And be careful out there!


16/11

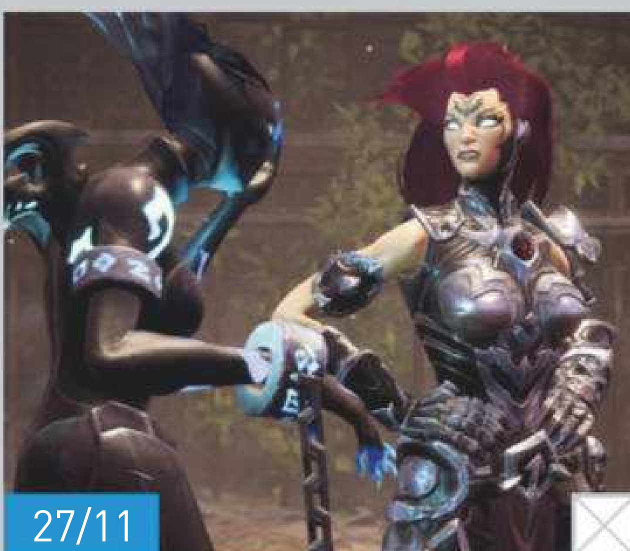
POKÉMON CATCHES *YOU*

Pokémon: Let's Go, Pikachu/Eevee! launches, aiming to draw newcomers in to the Pokécult.


20/11

ENLIST TODAY!

Test your scrap mettle, as epic WWII battler Battlefield V arrives in shops.


27/11

A FURY TALE

Darksiders III launches today, with faster, harder combat and a more intricate world.


04/12

MECH YOUR MIND UP

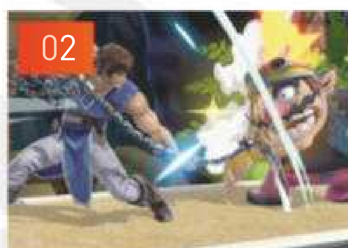
This issue's cover star, Override: Mech City Brawl, clanks onto shelves today.

INCOMING

Five big releases headed to a format near you...


01

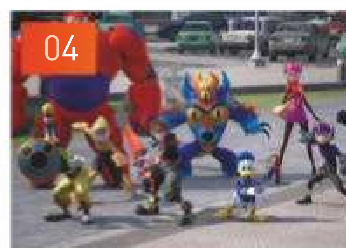
Just Cause 4
Format PS4, XO
Out 4 December


02

Super Smash Bros Ultimate
Format Switch
Out 7 December


03

Resident Evil 2
Format PS4, XO
Out 25 January


04

Kingdom Hearts III
Format PS4, XO
Out 29 January


05

Overkill's The Walking Dead
Format PS4, XO
Out 8 February



KICK SOME BOT

BITE OUR SHINY METAL MAG!

WE'RE GOING FOR A DEEP DIVE INTO OVERRIDE: MECH CITY BRAWL

By Luke Kemp

If you've read our past previews, you'll know that this game has been raising our eyebrows in a good way. Giant robots fighting each other, without the complex controls or crushing weight of a million stats this usually entails? Yes please! We were already excited and now, thanks to extended hands-on time – including exclusive access to the story mode and every multiplayer map – we're even *more* excited.

The fundamental concept is pretty simple: a brawler for two to four players, where every character is a mech, and each limb on a mech is controlled with a different trigger button. In fact, this control scheme came about before everything else. "It first started as more of a tech demo," says producer Andrew Nguyen. "The developers were actually trying to make a game kind of like QWOP. In that game you control a


The effectiveness of split-screen will depend on the size of screen that you use, but it's a welcome inclusion.

jogger with four buttons, it's super-hard. [Our demo] was about controlling all the different limbs, and it took insane co-ordination just to keep it balanced, just to keep it standing."

Balance isn't an issue in the final product (unless, of course, an opponent knocks you over onto your oversized metallic backside during a scrap). The team soon realised that the mechs with individually controllable limbs would work brilliantly in a brawler. So that's the direction the project took, and the game became much simpler and more accessible as a result.

Bot fuss

When we're handed a controller to play around with the latest build, it's like slipping back into a pair of oddly shaped, yet comfortable, slippers. Punches and kicks are slow and weighty and, of course, independently controlled. There really isn't a fighter with a directly comparable system, and we suddenly find ourselves very glad that we'd previously spent time with the beta. Unsurprisingly perhaps, we lose our first match to the developer, but we manage to avoid *entirely* humiliating ourselves.

Although it's easy to jump in and start playing straight away, it's the aforementioned weight to your hits that takes the most getting used to. How, we ask, did the devs manage to strike the right balance between speed and communicating this sense of weight?

"Through a lot of arguing!" Nguyen immediately replies. "This game started off much slower, *much, much* weightier. It took months to get something that felt good as a brawler. We're not going to please everybody, but I think we've found a good balance."

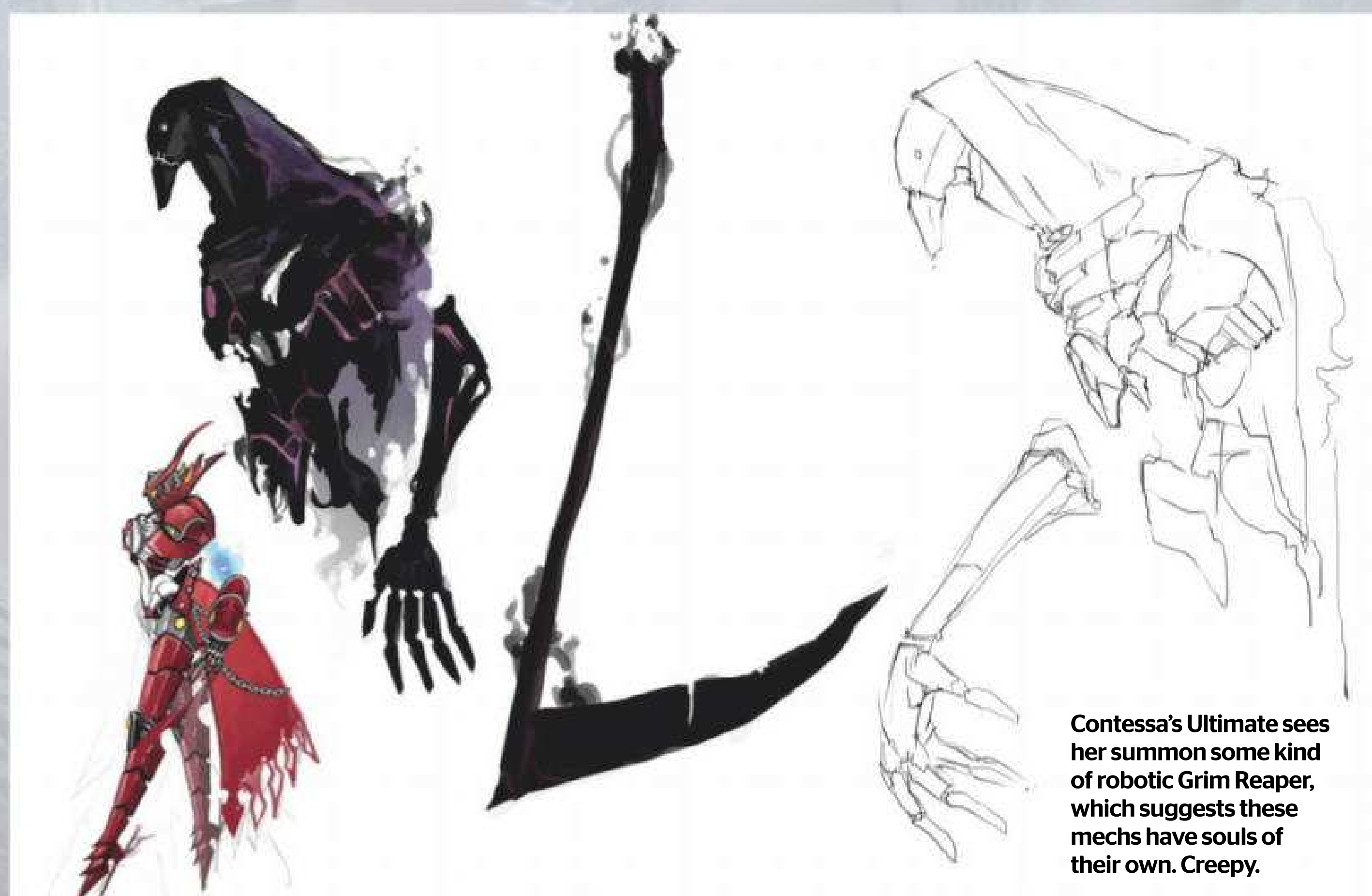
However, if you think this means the game's a syrupy fighter in which matches move at a glacial pace, think again. The dash button alone eliminates that, allowing us to rapidly close the gap whenever we're bold enough to charge Nguyen (rare) and throw ourselves out of the way when he's looking dangerous (often). Some of the special moves (dependent on a meter charged by landing hits) are either projectile attacks, or physical ones that launch your mech of choice across the arena, and weapons such as swords, shields, guns, and flamethrowers are randomly dropped into the map to keep everybody on their ten-ton toes. Not to mention the Ultimates, super-powerful attacks available once your mech is down to its last chunk of life.

"PUNCHES AND KICKS ARE SLOW AND WEIGHTY AND, OF COURSE, INDEPENDENTLY CONTROLLED"

Maybe you want a purer fighting experience? No problem. You'll have the option of disabling weapons and Ultimates if that's what you want to do. Indeed, the developers are keen to put players in control of how matches play out. Online, there will be three match queues: two for traditional 1v1 fights (one ranked, one unranked), and one for four players. A free-for-all, two teams of two, a team of 3v1, multiple people controlling the same mech [see 'Twenty One Pilots',

METAGECKON

We expect a significant number of new players to gravitate toward Metageckon. We certainly did. He's the stuff of mech battle dreams, a giant metal dinosaur with the ability to shoot laser beams from his mouth – who wouldn't want a go at that? His short arms mean that his standing punches don't have quite the range of his opponents', but he's still one of the more fearsome characters. One special move sees him curl himself into a ball, and roll around the map with surprising speed; another, activated in mid-air, again curls him up before sending him hurtling to the ground with devastating force.


Contessa's Ultimate sees her summon some kind of robotic Grim Reaper, which suggests these mechs have souls of their own. Creepy.

Attacks can be blocked, and there's no distinction between high and low – but blocks can be broken.

PESCADO

We're not sure what inspired Pescado's pilot to design their mech in such a way – a half-man, half-fish wrestler with star-shaped nipples – but we presume it involves a traumatic childhood event. Disadvantaged at a distance, he's possibly the trickiest mech to master – and a favourite of the developer. "We like that he's kind of self-punishing," says Nguyen, referring to the fact that mistiming many of Pescado's moves leaves you wide open to attack. "His entire body is a hitbox. Anywhere on the body will do damage." So don't be shy about bodyslamming your way to victory!


There's a decent map variety, spanning the globe. Wherever you are in the world, there's stuff to knock opponents into.

p29]... exactly what a four-player match looks like will be up to *you*.

We're looking forward to kicking the scrap out of strangers online, but there's plenty going on here offline, too – not least the story mode, which your buddies at GamesMaster were allowed to look at in detail. "You play through the story mode with each mech, and they each have a slightly different story," Nguyen explains. "The arc is the same, but they all have their own dialogue variants. You get to know the pilots behind the mechs, which we haven't really shown yet."

It turns out there are squishy humans inside those mechs. You can completely ignore this in the main brawling part of the game, but the story explains who these people are, and how and why they have their own giant robots. "There's a mech battle league, it's kind of like a WWE-type thing for mechs. A lot of these guys compete in that league, some of them use mechs for other purposes besides entertainment. In the story, there's a monster invasion, and now these league mechs are being called on to save the world."

Monster mashed

The monsters that we see are immediately striking, Pacific-Rim-style kaiju beasts. Nguyen gives a bunch of them what-for in the middle of one of the destructible cities, in gameplay that seems comfortably similar to the standard brawling. Though we only get a brief taste of monster designs, we're promised that the final product will have a large collection of varied beasts of different shapes and sizes.

Each mech's story will only take an hour or so to play through but, with 12 mechs, that's at least 12 hours of story mode gameplay. Though in today's industry, with cries of "single-player is dead!" worryingly common, why make a story mode at all? "We always wanted to take something outside of its normal environment, and do something a little bit different. And," Nguyen assures us, "we get to do different things here."

He's not lying. The story offers elements which are, with good reason, completely absent from the competitive portion of the game. "At the end of each level you get XP, and you get mods that you can collect; and it's randomised. So every time you play through, it's a little bit different. You get mods that do things like add lifesteal to your attacks, increase your stamina, add reflect damage, all kinds of weird stuff that we wouldn't really put into the competitive mode. There's a lot of mods, and you're not going to collect everything [in one run]." Despite the roguelite elements, we're assured that the game will be challenging without becoming overly punishing. "We really like the story that



Vintage (below right) is an odd-looking retro mech, with an amusing walking animation. No less deadly for that.







TWENTY ONE PILOTS (OR FOUR, ANYWAY)

Override allows one to four people to play in a match together, with or without AI. But that's not all. You can also have up to four people *in the same mech*. How does that work? Why, with much hilarity and many passive-aggressive suggestions, of course! With two players, one is the pilot and the arms, the other the legs. With three players, there's one pilot, one controlling legs, one controlling arms. With four players, it's one for legs, one for each arm, and one pilot.

We found this worked surprisingly well, though communication between players becomes essential when there are three or four of you in one mech. Playing 2v2 in this way, we managed to dodge attacks, and even retreat underground on the Egypt map to avoid an Ultimate. With everybody crowded into the same mech, we managed – *just* – to defeat an AI opponent on the highest difficulty setting. It works!

we ended up writing for it, so we're like, 'Wouldn't it be a shame if people didn't even try it because it's too hard?' We'd rather just open up the content, and let people enjoy it."

Nguyen skips through the on-screen dialogue between levels so that we can get back to the action, but not before a few things jump out at us. For one thing, there's an army general who, according to our notes, appears to be named Mavis (we may have misread that, but we really hope we didn't). We also catch a few snatches of dialogue as it hurtles past our eyes.

"I bring entertainment to the masses," says a pilot, presumably a participant in the aforementioned mech battle league.

"Well now you'll bring death from above!" barks the general.

Finding story

"It's kind of Saturday morning cartoonish. We're not taking ourselves too seriously here," says Nguyen, which comes as no surprise to Team GM. "We just want to make ourselves one cut above 'fight the roster'. In between each story mission, you'll have an opportunity to do a few side-missions. These are randomised, and you can see if the reward is some XP, or a weapon pack." The story mode, therefore, is on track to offer a nice extra chunk of content. A big blob of offline ketchup to dip your gaming chips into, if you will.

Still, you don't need the magic of the internet to play with three friends. You can enjoy the four-player experience in person thanks to couch co-op, something that the developer felt it was important to include. As Nguyen says, "It's so rare to have couch co-op [...] it's such a nice thing for people to be able to play together [in the same room]. We try to have something for everybody, make it as accessible as we can."

With four people in the room – Nguyen, a PR rep, and two components of the GM hive mind – we take full advantage of this. A free-for-all proves to be a story of pain, uncomfortable alliances, treachery, and plenty of crushed buildings. GM goes for the frog-like Cocada and the Egyptian-themed Setesh; we share the city with poster bot Vintage and the dinosaur-flavoured Metageckon. Time to show what we're made of (or, preferably, show what the others are made of by distributing it all over the map).

A split-screen display gives everybody their own view. Nguyen's Metageckon quickly gets to work, using claws and tail to dish out pain to anybody foolish enough to get close. It's not long before his special meter begins to fill, and so, pretty soon, a laser shoots from his mouth (Metageckon's mouth, not Nguyen's) and knocks a chunk of health from GM's Cocada.

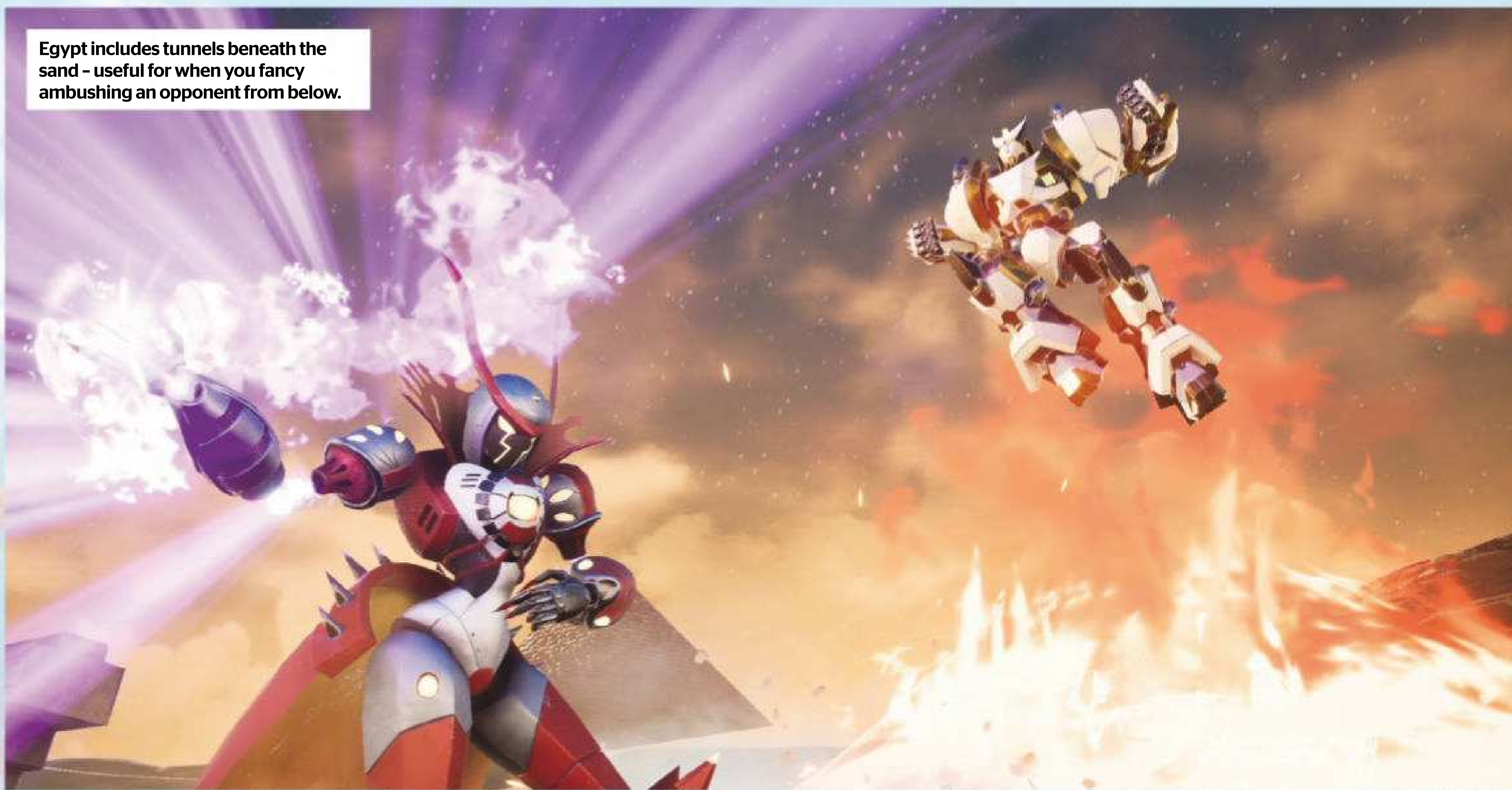
Poor old Cocada kicks and punches his enemies more than enough to earn sufficient meter to launch a few homing missiles, but alas, it's not long before he's dangerously close to defeat. We trigger his Ultimate, signalled by a brief cutscene before the giant metal frog breakdances his way into a city-destroying, controllable tornado that we steer into his foes, chipping away at their health. Alas, not long after this is over, he is destroyed by... fellow GM mech Setesh. Where's the loyalty??

The losing mech having exploded, his section of the screen disappears, and the remaining three widen. As the match flows, Setesh and Metageckon temporarily team up to put Vintage out of the picture, before again turning on one another. Metageckon launches his Ultimate, hurtling *through* Setesh with a sword before dramatically pausing

"A FREE-FOR-ALL IS A STORY OF PAIN, UNCOMFORTABLE ALLIANCES, AND CRUSHED BUILDINGS"



Vintage reminds us of consoles of yesteryear – but this is a game for today.


Egypt includes tunnels beneath the sand – useful for when you fancy ambushing an opponent from below.







I CAN'T BELIEVE IT'S NOT BETA

The game's closed beta provided the team with valuable feedback. And they *were* looking for player comments, as Nguyen explains. "You never know what the game's going to be like, and how balanced it is, until you get thousands of people playing it! […] we knew that we *needed* feedback, but that word 'beta' these days, people don't know what it means per se, because a lot of the time it's just like a glorified demo.

"We got a ton of good feedback from folks. We tried to address the most popular points of feedback. We got something like 2,000 responses. Pretty good, super-helpful for us." As you would expect, this led to the devs making various tweaks, balances, and nerfs. However well-balanced the final package turns out to be, the fact that the developer has been listening to players before the game is even released can only be a good thing.

behind his opponent ("We tried to make that look as anime as possible," says Nguyen.) Setesh survives with a sliver of health, triggers his own wide-ranging Ultimate… and emerges victorious!

That match took place in one of the cities previously seen in the beta, but we got a look at all of the others, too, including some exclusive time with the Brazil and Mexico maps. Mexico is visually striking, a night-time city scene where the buildings are lit up. Until you crush them, of course. Brazil, in particular, is interesting, offering opportunities unavailable in the other maps. While still a city environment, it's not so flat, with a raised motorway running through the middle. The supports can offer temporary cover, while retreating to the height of the road can give you breathing space for projectile or aerial attacks.

The latest build also gives us a look at some of the alternate skins for the first time, such as Metageckon doing his best Cthulhu impression, and the retro-styled Vintage looking shiny and, um, wearing a giant-mech-sized rubber ducky ring. At launch, each mech will have 20 locked skins. We know what you're thinking, but don't worry: Override will not feature loot boxes or microtransactions.

"You unlock them by playing through the story mode and completing online matches," Nguyen explains. "So whether you win or lose, you get something. They unlock at random, [but] if you win, you have a higher probability of getting something better. We also wanted to incentivise people to not rage quit. So if you're losing, you still get something […] the simple ones are just colour swaps, the rarer ones are more striking. Their Epics have more detailing, the Legendaries change their model." There will also be a total of 30 accessories to unlock at launch, and these are one-size-fits-all. Want to see a towering, city-destroying mech in a hat? Now you can!

Whipped chrome

With the game almost finished, work has begun on post-launch content. Some time after launch, there will be an additional 16 skins and four mechs available to purchase (or to download straight away if you go for the amusingly named Super Charged Mega Edition). Not even GM could get more information than that, though we're promised that the additional mechs will, as with the existing designs, be something we haven't seen before. "[The artists] definitely didn't want clones, they definitely didn't want things to just feel like a quick iteration on an existing mech."

Mind you, with the ability to play with up to three others both online and offline, literally hundreds of items to unlock, and a story mode offering 12-plus hours of gameplay, the base package is set to offer more than enough to keep you busy. The core gameplay is simple to understand, and perfect for a quick blast with a group of friends; giant mechs fighting. Controlling individual limbs is surprisingly easy to get to grips

Don't make Pescado angry. You wouldn't like him when he's angry. Or even mildly annoyed, to be honest.

VIDAR

Appearing to have been inspired by the gazelle, not an animal known for its ferocity, you might expect the streamlined Vidar to be pigeonholed into the 'fast but weak' type. Well, you'd expect wrong, as there are no such predictable fighter types here. She's certainly the best choice if you prefer an agile playstyle, though. Her grappling hook can close distances more effectively than a dash, and her double jump can prove to make a crucial difference on maps that offer higher ground, such as Brazil. If you're playing against her, beware her Ultimate, a storm of arrows that will stun if you get caught dead centre.

"YOU UNLOCK SKINS BY PLAYING THROUGH THE STORY MODE AND COMPLETING ONLINE MATCHES"

with, and special moves and Ultimates are activated with simultaneous button presses. No complex movement and button combinations.

There's depth for those who want it though, as Nguyen explains. "We tried to make everything punishable, in a sense. The game is obviously still very friendly to just button mashing; but for those who want to get serious or get good, we wanted to make sure the game had enough legs to allow for that. A key factor was to make sure that everything has a counter. So nothing feels too powerful, and when everything has counters, then you can do things like mind games and fakes. So for example, if I were to charge a punch, you might have the ability to kick me and interrupt me, or perform a counter, which would make me pay for it. *But* I can also do things like this [sends our mech flying], where you decide to do a kick counter, and then I cancel, so then you end up doing a counter-manoeuvre that leaves you vulnerable."

The potential for casual brawls among friends is undeniable, and Nguyen tells us there's even been positive feedback from the community at American fighting game tournament CEOtaku. "[It's] always kind of a scary thing to bring something to the fighting game community, and see how they receive it. We knew there was room for casual-type games like Smash [Bros] […] but you never know. So far people are digging it."

Us too, Andrew; us too.



CHOPPER FRENZY!

Gaming goes around in circles

Desert Strike and Gunship 2000 were the cover stars of GamesMaster issue 1, marking something of a golden age for helicopter games. Elsewhere in that issue, you'd find reviews of Micro Machines (NES, 91%), Lemmings (Mega Drive, 80%), NFL Sports Talk Football '93 (Mega Drive, 80%) and Pit Fighter (Master System, 20%). Cars, sports, fighting, rodents – gaming hasn't changed that much in 25 years.

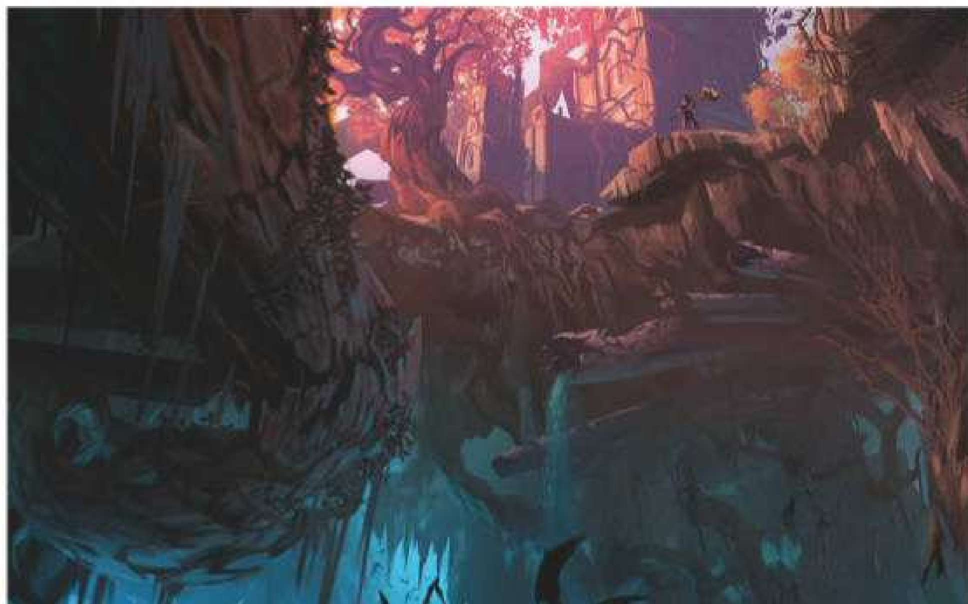


Thus guy likes to hide inside statues and jump out when you smash them. Luckily he's rooted to the spot.

"THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS LURK IN LAIRS AT THE END OF THE GAME'S DUNGEON-LIKE LEVELS"



They may look like they've parked their van to enjoy a cosy camp-out, but these demons won't be toasting marshmallows – we'll be toasting *them*.



Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** THQ Nordic
Developer Gunfire Games **ETA** 27 November

DARKSIDERS III

Hell hath no Fury… but we've got our hands on Gunfire Games' one

There are, traditionally, four horsemen of the apocalypse: War, Death, Famine, and either Conquest or Pestilence depending on which drugs the revelator has been taking. Darksiders has already chewed through War and Death, so a game in which you play as one of the others wasn't out of the question when Darksiders III was originally mooted back in 2012.

What we've got, though, is something rather different, at least in terms of the protagonist. In Darksiders canon, War and Death have a sister and her name is Fury (there's Strife too, being saved for later). Fury is aptly named, being partially on fire and carrying a chain-like whip, and is more nimble than her tank-like brothers, with a dodge move to avoid damage and attacks that conjure large weapons out of thin air rather than, as with War's ginormous sword, constantly having to carry them.

The game takes place at roughly the same time as Darksiders II, after War accidentally unleashed the apocalypse and destroyed humanity. The seven deadly sins (that's pride, greed, lust, envy, sloth, wrath, and our favourite, gluttony) became physical as the world ended, and escaped. Fury needs to get them back, because apparently their freedom in the destroyed world is bad even though there are no humans left and… does it have to make sense? The sins now lurk in lairs at the ends of the game's dungeon-like levels, acting as bosses begging to be vanquished, though you can tackle them in any order.

Gloom to manoeuvre

In the limited environments provided by the version of the game we play, it's not much of a looker – though we do need to stress it is a work in progress right now. Everything is a bit flat and enclosed, and even in 4K (the PC version we go hands-on with has no graphics options to tweak beyond resolution, which will go to 8K) wall textures look muddy and the enemies are dark and poorly



Enemies don't seem particularly frightened of Fury, which really is a rookie error. And we won't be giving them a chance to learn from their mistakes.



Tools of Fury
Whip these out in a fight

Chain whip
Soft, strong, and very, very long (okay, we're lying about the 'soft' bit), the chain whip can also be used as a grappling hook for crossing gaps. Once you gain the Flame Hollow it can transform into nunchucks.



Hammer
Purple-haired Force Fury's secondary weapon, the hammer hits hard but is distinctly slower, like something War would have used. Fans of the previous two games will enjoy smacking away with it.



Daggers
Fire Fury's secondary weapon is a quick knife attack. Her strikes are so fast the weapons blur through the air and you might never see them properly – but look at the fabulously fiery trail they leave behind..



Fire
The special attack in Flame mode burns everything around Fury, but you'll need a full wrath meter to unleash this kind of devastating attack. Needless to say, it can be a lifesaver if you're surrounded.



differentiated. They patrol up and down, but rarely do anything more interesting beyond charging at you when you're spotted, showing no fear of the supernatural lady with the glowing skull attached to her belt. Hopefully they, and their setting, will have rather more life by the time the game's released.



Fury herself is nicely rendered, her flaming hair negating the need to carry a torch in dark areas (we've already got the Flame Hollow in our hands-on, granting her some nifty abilities as well as a blazing barnet) and her high heels giving her a swaggering walk. While they don't have guns built into them, they don't seem to hinder her leaps into the air either.

> **"THE ACTION'S CHANGED FROM THE GLEEFUL HACK-AND-SLASH OF THE PREVIOUS GAMES INTO SOMETHING MORE PERSONAL"**

Enemies are tougher than in the previous two games, but there aren't so many of them. This changes the action from the gleeful hack-and-slash of six years ago into something more considered and personal, and the developer has clearly been playing the Souls games. This is manifested not just in the need to master the combat system, especially the dodge (which, if used properly, opens up powerful counterattacks, with different counter timings for each type of enemy), but in the interconnected warrens of tunnels and vertical levels that have replaced the hubs of the previous games. The Metroidvania nature of the game remains, however, with options opening up in areas you've already visited as you gain new abilities, and newly acquired special moves enabling you to smash through barriers.

Those moves are based around elements, and once Fury's acquired a Hollow granting her a new one, she can switch between them. They change things like the secondary weapon (we especially liked the Force Hollow's giant hammer), your elemental attack (magic, basically), and the colour of Fury's hair. Being in Flame mode allows Fury to walk on hot things, and we're sure the other elements will have their uses too. Ikaruga-style weaknesses to enemies depending on which element you're channelling? Don't rule it out.

Soul provider
You collect souls as you kill things, using them as currency with shopkeepers and to level up your abilities. Die, and you'll find a swirling phantom at the place you keeled over – hit it once to reclaim the souls you lost. Restarts are far from instant, sadly (though they're faster if you get knocked off a platform rather than killed in combat), and respawn points are far apart, requiring you to fight your way through resurrected enemies to the point where you died, where you can be killed again by a tough enemy if you haven't levelled up or decided on a winning new strategy.

Getting surrounded by enemies often means death, especially if your



The whip is a visually stunning weapon as it lashes around, but it can be hard to fully appreciate as it goes so fast. Still, we love the results.



Top up your health and wrath, and deploy offensive and defensive options, by scrolling through these and hitting Up on the D-pad.

Green for health, orange for wrath. Keeping them both well stocked is a good way to stay alive – if horseman Fury really is truly alive, that is.

Obtained after beating your first boss (one of the Seven Deadly Sins), this points the way to things you might find interesting. Like more Sins.

special-move-enabling wrath bar isn't filled up, so a tactic of pulling a single monster toward you and hoping the others don't notice can pay off – as long as one of its buddies doesn't jump down from a higher level on top of you, that is. Shards, which can be collected or purchased, provide health or wrath top-ups as well as defensive measures like a suit of spikes, but they take a moment to use, and in that moment you can take a fatal hit from behind.

The camera is well-behaved for a third-person brawler, with the ability to focus on the nearest enemy by holding a trigger and using the right stick to flick through them. Focusing is also the only way to see a monster's health bar, giving you an idea of how close they are to being finished off. When they die, the beasts melt away in a pool of green gunk instead of littering the place with bodies, leading us to suspect that the corpses we find along our way died of old age.

Retooling Darksiders like this for its third incarnation risks alienating long-term fans who loved their time with War and Death, but it seems like a sensible move as it positions the series well within today's gaming trends. Agility, thoughtful combat, and exploration are so *now*. If the final version looks a little sharper and perhaps has shorter loading times, we could be looking at a fine alternative to another trudge through Anor Londo. ■ ***Ian Evenden***

GM Instant Reaction

+ Feels like an intelligent update for the series, as the appetite for tough games with tight combat systems is proven.

– Effective countering takes a lot of practice, and this unfinished version doesn't look as great as we'd expected.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 3 4 5

Tentatively excited. We'd like the looks to match the action.


Numbers rise from enemies to indicate how much you're hurting them – you can turn this off in the settings if you like a bit of mystery to your mayhem.



Days Gone is great at creating a sense of panic – nothing like legging it from athletic zombies to get the adrenaline pumping.

Format PS4 **Publisher** Sony **Developer** SIE Bend Studio **ETA** 22 February 2019

DAYS GONE

Learning to control an unhappy crowd in post-apocalyptic Oregon

Until a couple of years ago, the zombie genre was saturated to near-pandemic levels. But things have slowed to a shamble lately, sadly earmarked by the closure this month of the studios behind the Dead Rising and Walking Dead series. Has the zombie bubble finally burst like a crumbling skull? Sony's open-world zombie (okay, 'Freaker') adventure Days Gone should have a few things to say about that, though we're still not sure what that is.

In fairness, playing a couple of separate sequences probably isn't the best way to get a feel for an open-world game. Our first task was to retrieve some bits and bobs for our motorbike – the main means of transport around the Oregon wilderness where the game takes place. We take control of battered-leather biker Deacon St John, who rocks up with a fellow tattered-denim type to some roadside services in search of supplies.

Unhappy eater

Whipping out our binoculars, we spy some creatures in the mid-distance. Getting closer, we discover from their appearance and shrieks that they used to be children, driven cannibalistic by whatever affliction's taken hold of this world. These so-called 'Newts' are territorial, so won't attack unless they feel threatened. "Maybe we should leave them alone," we contemplate. They are sort-of kids after all, the killing of whom remains pretty much the last unbroken taboo of games. But we need to test out the combat mechanics on something, and these are as close as we're going to get to training dummies, so we dive in.

You can approach combat via stealth, melee attacks, and shooting, piecing together things you find lying around to improve your weapons (we went with the classic 'nails-in-a-bat' routine). There's an overpowered x-ray vision which lets you see the outlines of Freakers through walls, and a radial menu system for switching up and modding weapons. Batting zombie kids to death feels fine, if you care to envision such a thing, though the animations leave a bit to be desired and the gore is virtually non-existent for a game in this splattery genre. It's a little weightless for an ostensibly gritty game.

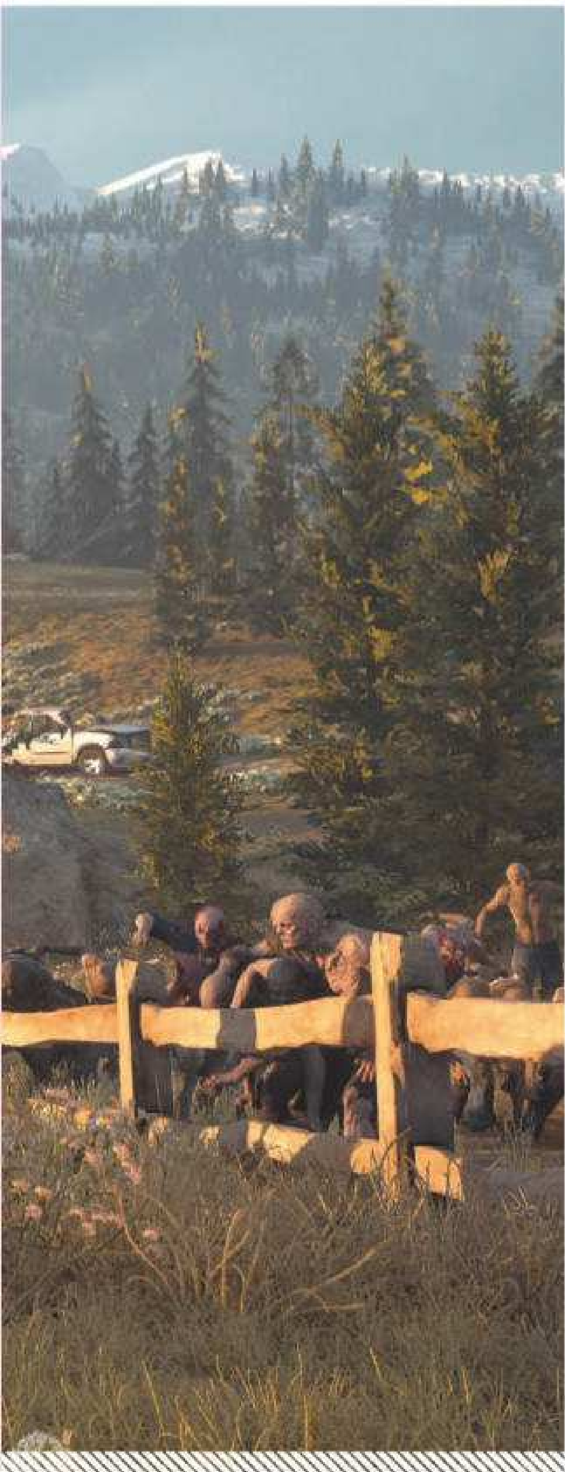


Working our way through the abandoned buildings, we silently knock off a few Freakers – your regular running zombie types – and chuck a Molotov to clear out one of their nests. But then we get careless. Things can escalate quickly in Days Gone, and a twitchy shotgun blast on our part causes Freakers to come streaming out of all nearby buildings. It's a tense moment, but nothing Deacon can't handle with a shotgun and some dodge-rolls.

But that doesn't prepare us for what comes next: the part of the game where Days Gone shows signs of being more than a by-the-numbers zombie romp. As the screen fades in for the second bit of the demo we're looking down into a logging camp filled with 100 or more zombies – and have free rein on how to tackle them.

Of course we try the silly stuff first: running at them and moshing out with a bat and shotgun (and dying), followed by speeding up on the motorbike and seeing how far we could plough through them (and dying). Both methods prove ineffectual as we're rapaciously ravaged by the rabble. Victory requires using that one thing zombies lack: brains.

After poking around, we find that the entire area can be set up as a gauntlet for zombies, filled with booby traps, narrow ravines to funnel the horde into, and





Meet Deacon St John – a biker outlaw in civilised society, he's just a rough-ridin' survivor now civilisation has collapsed. Clearly Freaker-induced anarchy isn't a bad thing for everyone.



The landscapes of Oregon look beautiful. The question is: can we go over those mountains on the horizon?



Freakers are a tough bunch to take on fisto-a-fisto, and you can quickly get swamped by their fast-running friends.





explosive barrels. First, we chuck all our Molotovs into the fray, and while this riles them up it also gets them dying. Slowly.

Logging off

They take a lot of hits, these blighters, but send a stack of logs rolling onto them and they quickly collapse into a giant omelette of necrotic flesh. After utilising every log-stack and explosive at our disposal, and spending a little too much time kiting the zombies around like some grisly reimagining of that chase scene from that Beatles movie, we're victorious.

This idea of having playful arenas like this within the open world is a good 'un, and being chased by hordes, where faster zombies often break away and come at you from unexpected angles, makes for the kind of teeth-gritting intensity found in 28 Days Later.

Days Gone will provide some great moments, where ammo is scarce and you're stumbling away from a horde swarming out of every building. But we've yet to see what this game is beyond these flashpoints, and the mechanics don't feel strong enough to prop up the game by themselves. For that, Days Gone will need a story of substance, and an open world to get truly lost in. ■ ***Robert Zak***

"THESE ZOMBIE KIDS ARE AS CLOSE AS WE'RE GOING TO GET TO TRAINING DUMMIES, SO WE DIVE IN"



GM Instant Reaction

+ There's a great sense of urgency when a swarm is after you. You'll be amazed at how quickly they can surround you...

– It feels generic, using elements from games as diverse as The Last Of Us and DayZ without asserting its own identity.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 3 4 5

Nice hordes, but the open world and story remain a mystery.

Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** EA DICE **ETA** 20 November

BATTLEFIELD V

World War II has stories to tell, and we've played three of them

Battlefield 1's War Stories campaign was one of the most pleasant single-player surprises of 2016, showing a sensitivity we had no reason to expect from a multiplayer-first shooter, making observations about the tragedy of war amid its vast set-pieces. Battlefield V gives this elegant treatment to World War II.

There are four stories in Battlefield V's War Stories campaign, focusing on less-explored parts of the war. Nordlys follows a Norwegian resistance commando looking to take out the Axis heavy water supplies, Tirailleurs is about the unsung sacrifices that Senegalese troops made for France, Under No Flag pits you as a cockney criminal recruited for the British Special Boat Service, and The Last Tiger charts a German tank commander stuck deep behind enemy lines in we-want-to-say Berlin.

Unsung non-heroes

Of these, the only one we didn't play was The Last Tiger, which will be available as a part of the still-mysterious 'Tides of War' service. We *do* know it's about a crew forced to face the consequences of their actions, and it's definitely 'not a heroic tale' (speaking with the devs, we got a sense that they're picking their words carefully about what could be labelled a Nazi War Story).

It's not easy to pack an emotional punch into each of several rather short stories (we played through the Nordlys campaign in one-and-a-half hours), but

> "ON THE GROUND, THERE ARE IMPROVEMENTS IN LEVEL DESIGN, WHICH AT THIS POINT FEELS ALMOST FAR CRY-LIKE IN ITS OPENNESS"



The War Stories campaign is incredibly moving, but that doesn't mean you'll want for action as you play through it.





A stealthy approach is often encouraged, though it's fair to say we're not taking it this time.

after blitzing through several missions, we can say that Battlefield V manages it using the same tricks as its predecessor.

Like before, each tale zooms right into the psyche of its protagonist, blinkered from the macro-scale ideological and political significance of the conflict. All are told with a well-written degree of internal monologues – be it a Senegalese war veteran recalling mixed feelings about fighting for a country he never knew, or the delirious memories that haunt the Norwegian commando overcome by hypothermia.

Offering a counterpoint to these stern narratives is the story of Billy Bridger, a bank robber who signs up with the Special Boat Service to avoid jail time. His first mission – to plant a bomb on a German warplane – suggests it's going to be a buccaneering tale rife with cheeky British banter. Sure, the presentation of protagonist 'Billy Boy' Bridger as a whining coward sort doesn't really fit with the fact that he's your conduit for taking out half a German airbase, but the dynamics between him and his team of vagabonds offers some welcome chirpiness in a campaign that looks set to be heavy-going in other areas (such as the sobering Tirailleurs story).



Playing War Stories soon after replaying the Battlefield 1 campaign, it's evident how much this is a direct transfer of that format, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. Even the prologue repeats the approach of casting you as different soldiers in different places, who duly get overwhelmed or blown up. The impact may be lessened through familiarity, but it still feels like World War II deserves this kind of narrative treatment.

Cry freedom

On the ground, there are improvements in level design, which at this point feels almost Far Cry-like in its openness. During the Nordlys campaign, we skied down to German strongholds nestled amid the fjords, where we were attempting to rescue a fellow Resistance member. Early on, we spied some soldiers fixing up a truck. We considered swooping in, thanking them for their handiwork with a knife between the ribs, and charging in over the bridge with the truck (popping some dynamite in the back while we were at it). But, seekers of secret paths that we are (*not* cowards), we sought other routes. A narrow path over a chasm led us to the underside of the main bridge into the fort, where a silenced pistol in a crate awaited us, and a metal supporting beam under the bridge took us across silently.

The stealth system is rudimentary: enemy alertness gauges fill up at a forgiving pace, and melee kills can be activated from a few feet away, sending you gliding towards your victim's throat. Guards will hear you the same whether you're walking on snow or steel grating, and neither foliage nor shadows seem to hamper their all-seeing eyes. Given a stealthy approach is encouraged in many missions, it still feels like a bit of a bolt-on rather than a carefully crafted system.

After a few botched attempts that lit the snow red with alarm lights and led to a good few buildings being blasted down, we snuck into the building where our target was held. The level of interior detail was impressive, and after admiring the scattered paperwork, gleaming typewriters and other 1940s titbits, we got her out of there. Instead of taking the quiet way out, we strapped on the skis and slalomed through enemy territory, bullets and wind whistling in our ears.

We went on to play several other missions, from classic control point capturing in Tirailleurs to a somewhat contrived survival sequence where you need to seek out fires before you freeze to death (which apparently happens in under a minute in Norway). Crucially, War Stories is hitting the target much more often than not. With the promise of longer, fully fleshed-out stories where before some felt like vignettes, there's plenty here to salute. ■ ***Robert Zak***

GM Instant Reaction

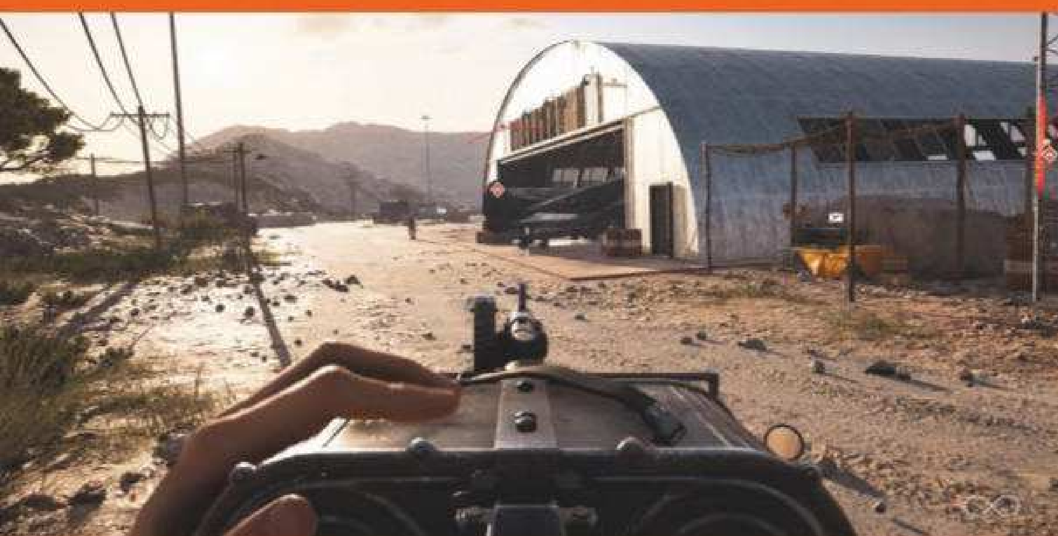
+ War Stories is expanding in scope, while maintaining the punchy storytelling and tasteful presentation that made it great.

– Certain stylistic repetitions inevitably lessen the narrative impact, and the stealth mechanics feel a bit shallow.

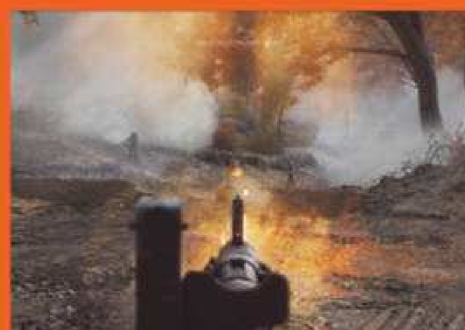
THRILL-O-METER

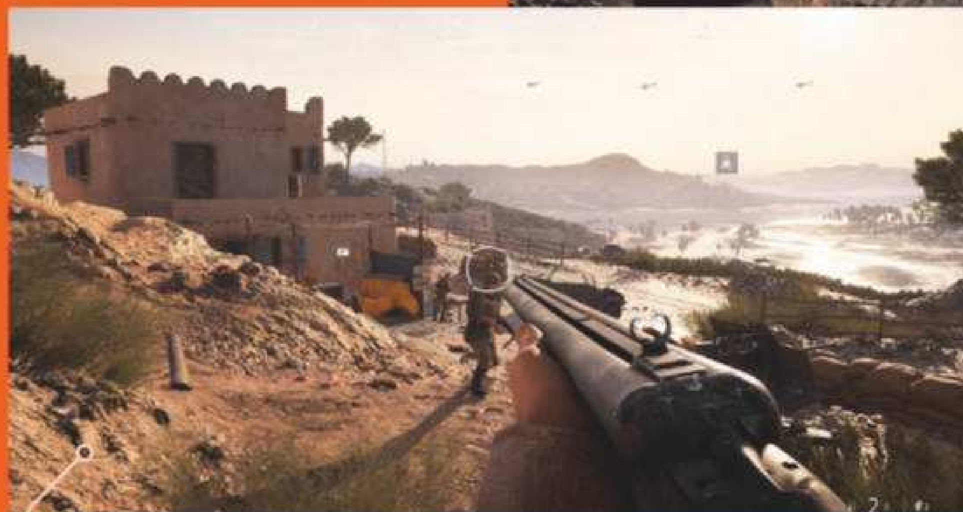
1 2 3 4 5

Diverse single-player stories and a monstrous multiplayer.









Had enough of the beaches of Normandy in games? Then rejoice, because Battlefield V is featuring some lesser-covered theatres of World War II.



You get a genuine sense of the person behind every War Story: every number was a human being.

Some conversational choices depend on your personality skills – and your thoughts butt in too.

Format PC **Developer** ZA/UM Studio
Publisher Humble Bundle **ETA** 2019

DISCO ELYSIUM

You're not talking to yourself in this detective RPG – you're listening

The simplest way to describe Disco Elysium is that it's an isometric RPG inspired by old-school pen-and-paper roleplaying mechanics. But when we're already having a conversation with our own subconscious, and the enigmatic choices get weirder and more disorientating, it's clear that this isn't like any game we've ever played.

You're a detective sent to a coastal town to investigate a murder. Before that however, your task is simply getting dressed after you wake up in nothing but your pants while suffering from alcohol-induced amnesia. We're still missing a shoe when we finally stumble out of our hotel room.

Disco inferno

The developer describes this world as an urban fantasy relatable to our own reality, albeit with a mixed-up timeline – for instance, rock music is ancient while disco is hip. It's also represented in an otherworldly oil painting style, as if the game's concept art has survived all the way to realisation.

However, that's just at surface level. What makes Disco Elysium so unusual is that you can customise your detective with 24 unique skills that make up his personality, from logical deduction and imagination to physical endurance. These attributes manifest as thoughts about who you talk to, and even argue among themselves, providing a ton of detail behind every interaction you make, whether it's interrogating the punk kid loitering by the crime scene, or a hilariously inept attempt to chat up a woman outside your hotel room.



Our failure may be down to our intellectual build (well, *we* think smart is sexy), which while great for finding evidence or picking up lore comes at the expense of decent social skills. It's also possible to go purely physical and solve problems by punching them. Even in these early stages, we can deduce that there will be myriad ways of playing detective – once we can get our head around it. ■ ***Alan Wen***

GM Instant Reaction

+ Mixes up skill attributes in a way unlike any other RPG, and does it in a unique urban fantasy setting to boot.

– It's difficult to gauge an RPG's depths in a brief hands-on. Will Disco Elysium's systems stand up in prolonged play?

THRILL-O-METER 1 2 3 4 5

Shaping your own persona in this detective RPG is mind-boggling.



If grappling with all 24 unique skills is somewhat daunting, or you fancy something different to what you'd naturally choose, archetypes are available for you to pick from.



Format PS4, PC **Publisher** Inkle
Developer Inkle **ETA** 2019

HEAVEN'S VAULT

On a distant planet, found in translation

Making 3D games is complex, and even the biggest studios have trouble producing convincing character models and animations. However, Inkle Studios has come up with an elegant solution, which is immediately striking when we go hands-on with Heaven's Vault.

It's a 3D open world but its characters, including protagonist Aliya, are depicted as hand-drawn 2D art, with over a thousand individual frames that fade into each other as she moves or when the camera rotates. Sidestepping 3D character modelling, this mesmerising comic-book effect allows for a variety of angles and expressions.

The game itself reminds us of The Witness. Rather than grappling with puzzles, it has you deciphering an alien language. As an archaeologist, you find inscriptions in the ruins, and are given a few possible interpretations for each glyph. But as you work on one phrase, you'll come across another inscription that might contain the same glyph, which can help you, or prompt you to reconsider an earlier translation.



Dictionary corner

The ability to cross-reference is at the heart of things, though the game is fine with letting you make the 'wrong' interpretation. Whatever you conclude, there's no gating of progress, so it's possible to finish the game and come to no understanding of the civilisation's history. It may, however, feel like watching a foreign-language film without subtitles.

Our demo ends with Aliya coming across a mural of text – and we just know a few short phrases from previous inscriptions, which gives you an idea of just how huge and complex the language system is. We're won over by its picture-book aesthetic and excited at the prospect of unearthing more Heaven's Vault's mysteries. ■ ***Alan Wen***







Your robot is called Six because the previous five went missing. Aliya's not a fan of the company, then.

GM Instant Reaction

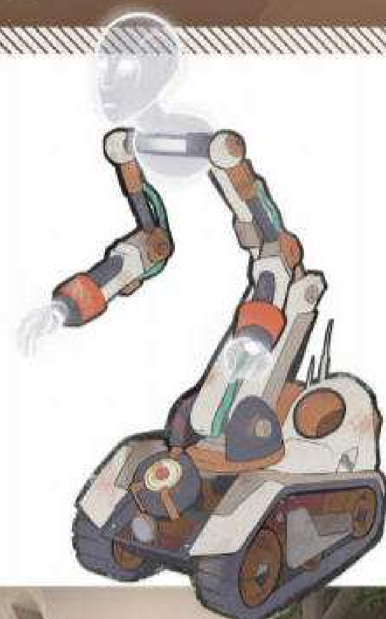
+ Mesmerising 2D art and a compelling translation system that you're free to engage with as much as you want.

– If you typically skip reading the lore in open world games, well, this is essentially the core gameplay.

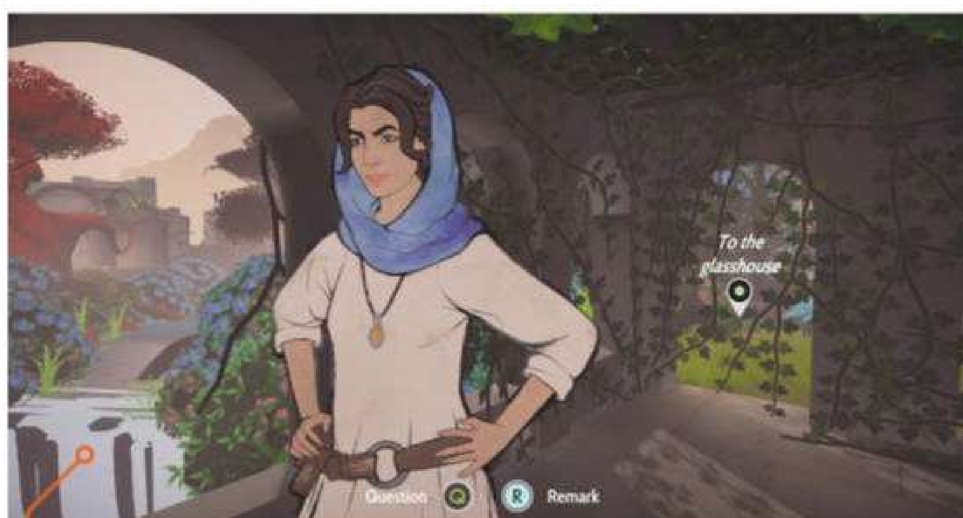
THRILL-O-METER

1 2 3 4 5

A winning 2D-3D combination with a whole world's lore to decipher.







As you explore, Aliya can ask Six questions or make remarks, the latter often giving you options to be a real jerk too. Well, sometimes the frustration's got to come out...



Glyphs you've already translated which share roots appear automatically when you come across new inscriptions, but will it still make sense?


The Stormchaser is one of the few vehicles in the game not affected by tornadoes, so you can stand near one steadfastly.

Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Square Enix **Dev** Avalanche Studios **ETA** 4 December

JUST CAUSE 4

Rico's enemies are about to have a thunder blunder

During our hands-on session with Just Cause 4 we sit down with the man himself, the game's director, Francesco Antolini. As he shows us the game, he's constantly talking about his love of open world games – Just Cause 2 is the one that got him to join Avalanche Studios, after all. He speaks with passion about some of his recent favourites: The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild; Metal Gear Solid V; and Assassin's Creed Origins (the man himself used to work at Ubisoft).

"There is actually one thing I'm seeing, where all good open worlds are going," Antolini notes. "It's this attempt at making the world itself more plausible and more able to communicate about status and what's happening without the need for an interface telling you. We're going in a direction of trying to get rid of the hand of the designer." That's the biggest takeaway you'll have from your first sit-down with the game. You just explore, experiment, and mess around in the sandbox, and everything just feels right.

Dark Solís

There aren't huge checklists of areas to liberate. Instead Solís feels like one connected space, with the war Rico and his army are fighting sweeping across it, pushing forward literally as he progresses with the frontline system. Rico's no longer fighting his way through a collection of small conflicts, he's tackling one big one, on a grand scale, and it's filled with things to blow up and mess around with. Rico's three-in-one grappling hook allows him to link objects together, add boosters to things, and attach balloons to them – all at the same time if he wants. And that's on top of just using it to pull himself towards things,

"SOMETHING UNEXPECTED ENDS UP HAPPENING. BUT IT ALWAYS MAKES SENSE WITHIN THE RULES OF THE WORLD"





The tornado is always spinning away somewhere, alongside constant extreme weather happening in the other biomes.



employed in tandem with the returning parachute and wingsuit to allow him to glide effortlessly over Just Cause 4's huge map.

It's all about giving you options. There's plenty to do to gain Chaos, and unlockables can be acquired to customise how you play by completing challenges. And they all have a reason to be there. All of Just Cause 4's systems are folded into the game. The way each type of grapple works can also be modified and customised – for instance, you can set objects with air lifts to follow Rico around (keep red barrels around and drop them for explosions), or you can set a booster to only propel objects horizontally or vertically if you want.

Weather man

"There is a certain degree of randomness," Antolini tells us of the world's physics systems, "just because the things that interact with each other are so many that your brain cannot just compare the possible outcomes, so what happens is that something unexpected ends up happening. But it's always something that makes sense within the rules of the world." That's what makes playing around in the world so fun. You want to see what you can make work within the rules of the game.

For us, picking up the controller for the first time, it's the simple joy of just seeing what can happen using the grappling hook. We're simple and easy to please: we see a goat, we attach a passerby to the goat, we put a balloon on the person, we put a booster on that balloon, and watch the show. Having learned something there, we move effortlessly through the following mission, where instead of just shooting our way out (which is still fun), we blast through enemies using the power of physics.

And what better way to throw real spanners into the works than with the new extreme weather – perhaps nature's ultimate physics derailer. With real weaponised wind in the game (watch out for tornadoes), what happens when you put boosters on a mounted wind-firing gun, and let it spin wildly? The four biomes' extreme weather conditions can be learned and mastered. Go too high during a thunderstorm, and lightning will strike you. If only you had some balloons that could lift your enemies into the air and... ah... we love the smell of barbecued bad guys in the morning. ■ ***Oscar Taylor-Kent***



GM Instant Reaction

+ Wreaking havoc as Rico has never felt so good, nor experimenting in the series' glorious sandboxes so effortless.

– With much left to learn about the story, we have to wonder whether the goofy fun can translate into something more.

THRILL-O-METER



Rico's Solís adventure looks set to be the most chaotic Just Cause yet.







Soar too high in your wingsuit in a thunderstorm and you're going to end up zapped. Don't hate the player, hate the weather. Or turn it to your advantage, and you'll come to love it.

Interacting with things like dried fruits can revive them, helping you convince the pupils that you exist.

Format PS VR **Developer** From Software
Publisher Sony Interactive Entertainment **ETA** November



DÉRACINÉ

The Dark Souls creator summons his more spritely side

It says a lot about Hidetaka Miyazaki's creative clout that he's famed for creating Dark Souls, but when he comes out with a walking sim about fairies in a traditional British boarding school, you're all-in to see how it pans out. On the evidence of the half-hour demo we played of Miyazaki-san's VR fairy simulator Déraciné, it's going very beautifully indeed.

At a glance, Déraciné looks like a walking sim, though hands-on it actually feels more like an old point-and-click adventure. The segment we play lets us move around a large chunk of the beautiful Victorian-era boarding school, but movement is entirely based around teleporting. This sacrifices some immersion in favour of negating motion sickness, but it also suits the largely static nature of the game.

Everything and everyone in the game world stays still until you, as the fairy, come into contact with it, unlocking little bits of dialogue and the ability to read letters, obtain objects from children, and other minor actions. Our objective in the demo was to help some of the students convince the more sceptical ones that fairies exist – by spiking one kid's soup with knockout serum, naturally.

85% complete

Tinker-bell

To persuade the students we exist, we tinker around; interacting with kids, finding things in one place then slotting them in another, then finally doing the mischievous deed. You're not rooted to the ground, so can zap yourself under a walkway where a dog may be hiding, or up into a tree where a boy may be lazing in the shade with a hat over his eyes (which you can take off his head and give back to him to create a little moment of wonder for him). You're a half-presence in the world, a gentle spirit, and it's something that feels so apt for a PS VR game.

Déraciné looks and sounds beautiful, combining Dark Souls' propensity for echoing, ethereal dialogue (yet removing the tough bosses; not sure there's a place for them here unless the school needs a maths teacher) with a dreamy, sepia tone that makes you long for half-remembered, never-ending, hot summers and the innocent days when things like fairies and Father Christmas seemed plausible. It's shaping up to be just the kind of intimate, tactile game that VR needs more of. ■ ***Robert Zak***

GM Instant Reaction

+ The boarding school is an immersive environment to float around in, dousing you in feelings of nostalgia and warmth.

– The limitation of teleport movement is justified, but an option to move around more freely would be welcome.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 3 4 5

A gentle snoop-around experience that shows a softer side to VR.



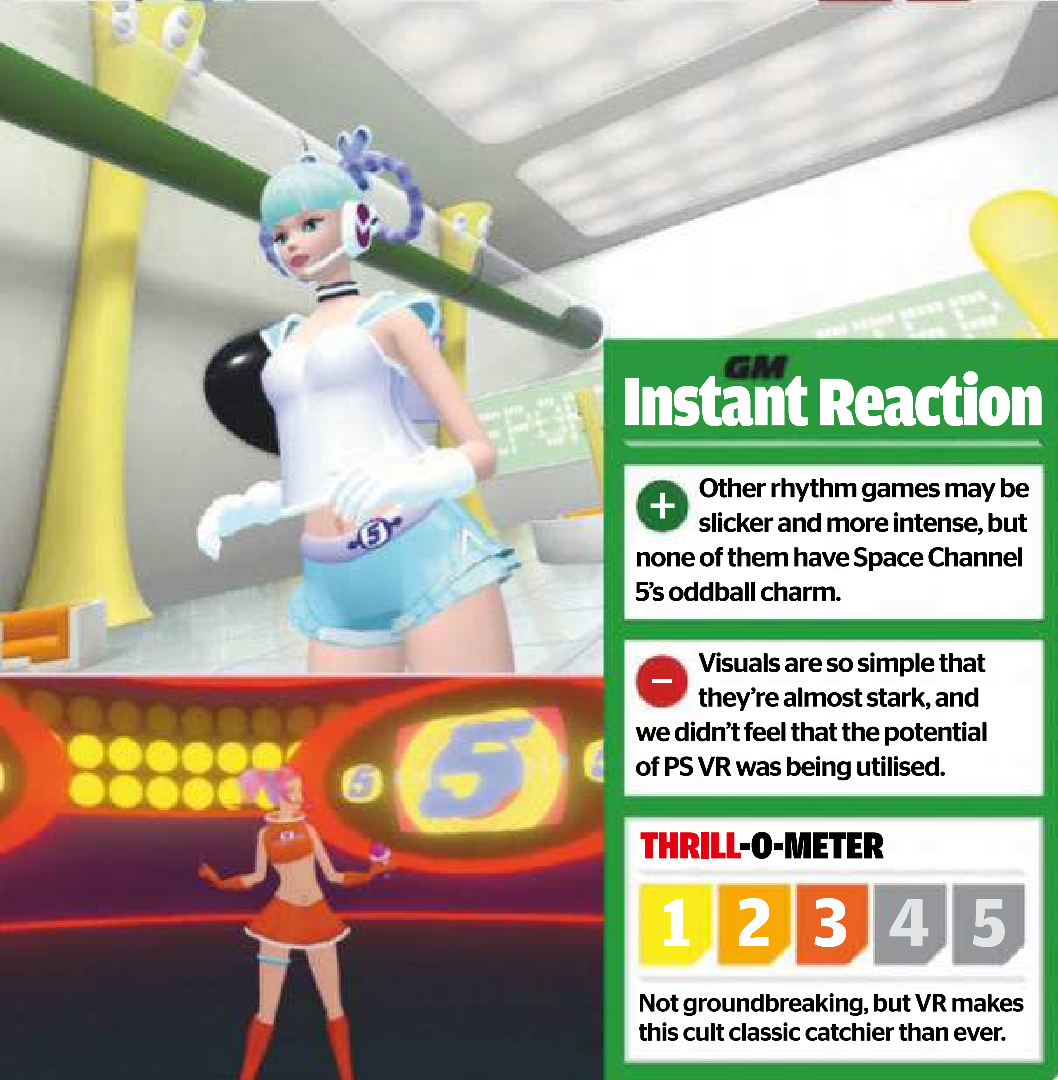


The boarding school is detailed and a beautiful place to explore, with a sepia tint to everything, and dust-speckled sunlight streaming in through windows.



This purple goon from the original game returns, though this time he's going to get right in your face.





Format PS VR **Publisher** Sega
Developer Grounding Inc. **ETA** 2019

SPACE CHANNEL 5 VR KINDA FUNKY NEWS FLASH

Haven't Choo heard? Sega's cult rhythm action classic is coming to VR

It's kind of a miracle that Space Channel 5 still exists. The rhythm game, set aboard a '60s-styled space station beset by aliens who can be overcome by the power of dance, feels like a relic of the Dreamcast days. And yet here it is, right at home in the ultra-modern medium of PS VR.

We play one level of Space Channel 5 VR, zapping aliens by mimicking their movements, aided by the catchy voice of series heroine Ulala. We pull off left and right moves, where one arm goes across the chest while the other stretches out, as well as thigh-burning squats, and finally the iconic 'Choo' that zaps aliens at the end of a sequence (sometimes preceded by twirling the PS Move controllers around our head).

The game doesn't frazzle your senses. The graphics are simple and the space station is a stark white space. It is nice, if a little neck-straining, to see the people we save from aliens are actually dancing away right behind us, helping us to defeat the Morolian menace with funky moves, though really we'd prefer them to be positioned closer to our natural field of vision to make things feel more lively.



Choomungous

After a salubrious five minutes of Choo-ing the hell out of our assailants, their boss turns up – an amorphous purple blob that stretches its long, ball-ended arms out towards us. Dodging it by literally crouching down gives us our first real 'Whoa there' VR moment of the game, and we're hoping to have plenty more of those as things ratchet up in later levels.

Amid today's brilliant rhythm games, such as Beat Saber and Thumper, Space Channel 5 feels like a fond 'Choo' to the past rather than an intrepid moonwalk into the future. But the series' catchy cutesiness is all there, reminding us why Ulala and co have such cult appeal after all these years. We may well choo-se this when it's out. ■ ***Robert Zak***

GM Instant Reaction

+ Other rhythm games may be slicker and more intense, but none of them have Space Channel 5's oddball charm.

– Visuals are so simple that they're almost stark, and we didn't feel that the potential of PS VR was being utilised.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 **3** 4 5

Not groundbreaking, but VR makes this cult classic catchier than ever.

Format Switch, PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Sumo Digital **ETA** Winter 2018

TEAM SONIC RACING

Team if you wanna go faster

We're on the final lap and down in seventh position. We're not going to finish in first, that much is clear, but that doesn't mean we're going to sit back and go through the motions. You see, there are three of us in a team, and if we can just knock Knuckles, who is one place ahead of us, off his stride, we may just clinch the race for our team.

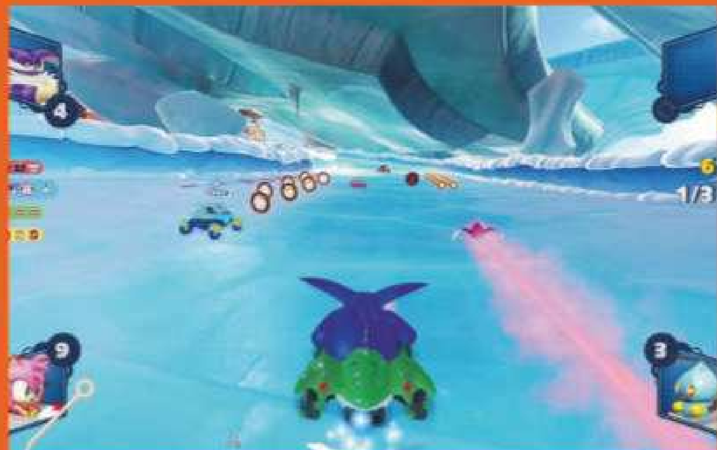
That's the essence of Team Sonic Racing's spin on the battle racer. It's a game of teamwork, won by having the highest joint score in a match (defined by finish position and also rings collected, which you can get by attacking other racers). Adding some depth to this new dynamic are various team moves, such as swapping power-ups with your teammates or following their tracks on the ground closely to get a speed boost after a couple of seconds (potentially overtaking them, at which point they can do the same to you). Pull off enough of these moves, and you all sync up for an 'Ultimate boost', which gives you several seconds of improved speed and handling.

Human race

Just how well the system works will only become fully apparent after extended play alongside fellow human beings (there will be four-player local and 12-player online multiplayer), but it gels nicely from what we've seen. If, for example, your mate picks a speedy character (like Sonic, duh), you could pick a heavier build and dedicate yourself to ramming opponents, hoovering up their rings while protecting your teammate's precious position. Or if you're further behind the others, you can take a glance at which team is winning, and target its lower-placed characters, so when you overtake them it may just swing the race your team's way.

Coming from Sumo Digital, the developer behind the excellent Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed, Team Sonic Racing handles generously, making it easy to drift around large portions of

> "IF YOUR TEAMMATE PICKS A SPEEDY CHARACTER, YOU COULD PICK A HEAVIER BUILD AND GO AROUND RAMMING OPPONENTS"



Pick a larger character, like Big, and you can bully your rivals while your speedier teammates race on ahead.





The first track we played looked like it was inspired by Green Hill Zone... not that it was all that inspiring...

80% complete

track for speed boosts, and not punishing you too hard for flying off the track like a wally. It's made for everyone.

Total eclipse of the kart

Speaking of flying, Team Sonic Racing is strictly a kart racer, unlike its predecessor which would switch between karts, boats, and planes – often in the same race. This is also strictly a Sonic game, so you won't find tracks from Sega's other IPs or guest characters like Wreck-it Ralph, the Team Fortress lot or, er, Football Manager from Football Manager. These cutbacks feel like a gross loss, particularly if the cast of Sonic is a bit shrill and infantile for your tastes (weren't they all more appealing *before* they learned to speak?).

The previous game, while mechanically competent, shone thanks to its wacky diversity, its tracks ranging from the cel-shaded downtown of Jet Set Radio, to a camp-spooky party at the House Of The Dead mansion. The Sonic series has never been renowned for its eye-catching environments, and the two tracks we played here – a Green Hill Zone-type course and the obligatory icy one – didn't tickle our nostalgia or dazzle us with garishness. They just weren't that exciting. But if the new teamplay system pulls through and begets all manner of team strategies and character combos, there could be enough excitement on the track that you won't have time to fawn over the pretty backdrops. It all feels like a bit of a gamble, but an intriguing one at least. ■ ***Robert Zak***

GM Instant Reaction

+ The new teamplay system has plenty of promise, adding a dimension to a genre that tends to keep things simple.

– Getting rid of the non-Sonic tracks and characters removes the scope that made previous instalments so great.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 3 4 5

A bold change of direction for an underrated battle racer series.

Q&A quickie

Screeching to a halt for a brief pitstop with Sonic producer Takashi Iizuka



Why make it a team game?

With the recent trend for team online games like Overwatch and Splatoon, we also wanted to create something where you share the thrill of victory with other people.

Free DLC? Lootboxes? Customisation?

No lootboxes! No DLC planned yet either. Because it's an online game we'll provide plenty of stuff for players to distinguish themselves, including accessories and cars with different specs that will affect gameplay.

Will voice communication be important, or will on-screen info be enough to co-ordinate with teammates?

There's lots of info on-screen, such as the items your friends are carrying, but there will be voice chat too – handy for things like the Slingshot move, where you need to follow your teammate closely to get a speed boost.

There are no Sega All-Stars here. What's happening to that series?

The All-Star concept hasn't been abandoned. That IP is with Sega Europe, so if they have a new idea there's always a chance for another All-Star-type game!





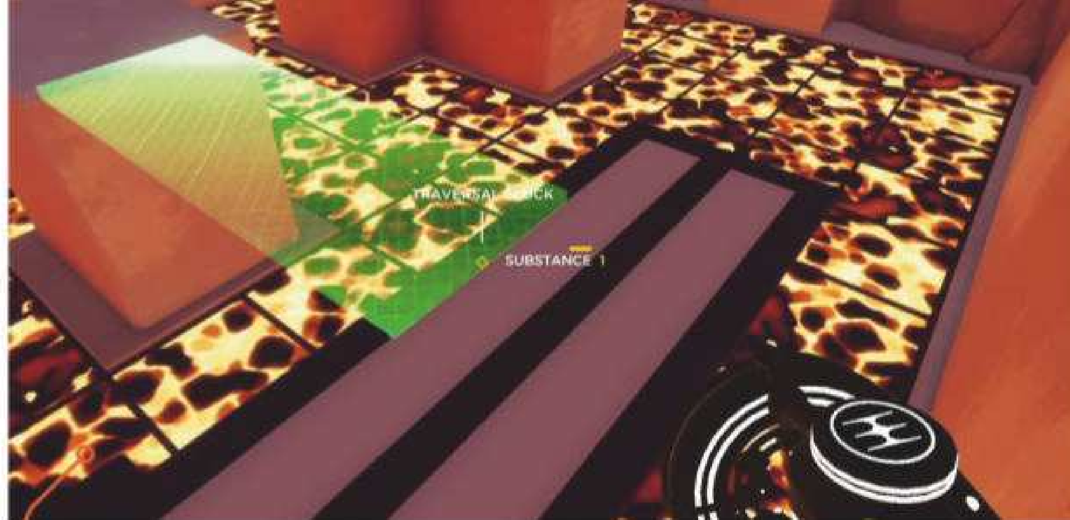
Collecting rings adds to your team's final score – just remember that your rivals can steal them off you.

Dedicated Sonic fans may cheer at the character selection, but some of us will miss the last game's wackier, more diverse roster.

Characters fall into three brackets: Speed, Technique, and Power. Knuckles looks like he fits in the latter category.



While the dev wants to create a sense of peril, death and respawns won't be part of the experience.



Before you can absorb and replicate objects using your 3D printer-gun, you need to collect a special substance, known as Bradwellium, for it.



You'll find yourself getting sucked in by the game's intriguing lore.





GM Instant Reaction

+ The science fiction feels grounded and plausible, and it's so far bolstered by an intriguing and funny script.

– The SMP is a cool gadget but don't expect physics-based puzzles; this is first and foremost a narrative experience.

THRILL-O-METER

1 2 3 **4** 5

We look forward to an old-school mystery with new tech toys.





There's a bit of Firewatch's Delilah in Amber, as her interactions with you are dependent on how communicative you are, or aren't.

Format PC **Publisher** Bossa Studios **Developer** A Brave Plan **ETA** 2019

THE BRADWELL CONSPIRACY

Technology won't save us – or can it?

Whether you're starting work at a police station in the midst of a zombie outbreak or a science lab conducting fishy experiments, first days on the job never pan out very well in videogames. Usually, disaster strikes so early that we end up missing out on an essential procedure at any workplace: the corporate induction.

85% complete

In first-person adventure The Bradwell Conspiracy, our silent protagonist doesn't even work at the titular tech company but assumes the identity of a new employee after an explosion occurs in its offices, leaving us trapped after everyone else has already been evacuated. Help is at hand in the shape of an AI guide and a fellow survivor, Amber, who's in another part of the building. Equipped with a pair of nifty Augmented Reality glasses, we can communicate with her by instantly taking and sending photos of what we can see, which she responds to with advice or sarcasm, depending on the relevance of the pictures.

Woss it all about?

Pretending to be a new employee incidentally means undergoing a very cheesy corporate induction, voiced by Jonathan Ross. It's a highlight of this extended demo where we're also introduced to the SMP, the instant 3D-printing gun used in the game's puzzles. At present, these feel very fixed according to the mostly linear narrative, so don't go expecting a new Portal. But from the opening two chapters, we're intrigued by this very British mystery (you can't get more British or mysterious than Stonehenge, where the offices are) set in the near future where making objects materialise right in front of you like in Minecraft is strangely plausible. ■ *Alan Wen*

Visual cues in speech bubbles tell you what's on the groundskeeper's mind. We love annoying him.

Format Switch, PC **Developer** House House **Publisher** Panic **ETA** 2019

UNTITLED GOOSE GAME

Spice up your gaming diet with a tasty morsel of jerk goose...

It's been a year since this game was first announced, and developer House House still hasn't given its goose simulator a proper name. But when you're playing a sociopathic character that for once isn't using its skills to grimly murder virtual victims but just to behave like an absolute nuisance, we can't really complain.

Causing trouble in a quiet village as a jerk of a goose is an idea that hasn't lost its charm and hilarity since its first reveal. Following its surprise appearance in a Nindies presentation, we're delighted to try the Switch build, even if we're just playing the same garden level seen last year.



Top billing

Taking control of the feathery menace, we have a prettily written checklist to hand, with objectives from sneaking into the garden to stealing items for a picnic by the lake, though we're given the most important instruction right away: 'press Y to honk'. It's hard to resist making a racket, and it's great for getting the attention of the poor groundskeeper much like how Solid Snake or Agent 47 can use noise to distract guards. In fact, an awful lot of what we get up to makes us feel like Solid Goose. We can also waddle into the bushes to hide, and, despite the minimalist faceless character models, the groundskeeper's hapless bumbling makes for beautiful sight gags when he's wandering around clueless as your beak is visibly poking out from behind a tree.

There's no real core objective besides attempting to exhaust the list of ways to ensure the poor old groundskeeper has a truly terrible day – our time sadly ends before we figure out how to trick him into wearing the sun hat hanging on the shed door. We're a little concerned about just how much mileage this premise has as a full game (god forbid that it needs a 'story' – do you really want obnoxious goose lore?). Nonetheless, when most games have us wielding a violent avatar or go the other way and remove any meaningful interaction, House House shows it's possible to have horrible yet harmless fun. ■ ***Alan Wen***

GM Instant Reaction

+ Turns familiar stealth mechanics into chaotic hilarity. Being thoroughly irritating has never felt so fun!

– This joke will probably live and die by its variety; we hope House House has enough sandboxes for us to be a git in.

THRILL-O-METER



Honk if you like being a jerk in games (just not in real life).





Our demo only has us harassing one character, but expect situations involving multiple villagers – perhaps even multiple geese!

GM Preview

Eyes-on With Future Hits!



Format Mobile **Pub** Ubisoft
Dev Behaviour Interactive **ETA** 21 Nov

ASSASSIN'S CREED REBELLION

Time to kill

We don't know a great deal about this upcoming mobile game, other than it looks to be Assassin's Creed's answer to Fallout Shelter, sharing as it does both a developer and the home-base-that-sends-out-explorers schtick with Bethesda's post-apocalyptic spin-off.

The assassins' hideout is more like XCOM HQ than a vault, however, with separate rooms that can be constructed and used to train a band of hired killers you've recruited from across time.

Killers they may be, but they're also cute, with a large-headed kawaii look that makes them appear like especially threatening Amiibo. Missions are represented as a series of rooms, with obstacles and enemies tailored to the skills of your three-strong team. ■ *IE*

GM Instant Reaction
THRILL-O-METER 1 2 3 4 5
Because you can't spell 'cute' without 'cut'.



We may never find out what these spheres are actually doing, but we bet our torch won't even scratch them.

50% complete

Format PC **Publisher** Big Robot **Developer** Big Robot **ETA** TBC

THE LIGHT KEEPS US SAFE

Mister blue sky is living here today, hey hey

No sky, just killer robots that hunt in the darkness. It doesn't sound like a jolly videogame pitch, but perhaps it's not meant to. Developer Big Robot has previous in this area, having released Sir, You Are Being Hunted four years ago.

In that game, aggressive British robots hunted humans through a procedurally generated countryside before stopping for tea. The Light is similarly unravelled from a mathematical formula, rather than having a set map, but whereas Sir had the murky grey skies you associate with a weekend in Bognor, The Light covers everything in darkness.

It's a stealth and survival game, but one that cleverly inverts the way we're used to being unseen, by making the first-person player run from pool of light to pool of light, rather than sticking safely to the shadows.

The robots, whose designs echo the spindly walkers of the Dishonored games, don't like light, which perhaps explains the sky – it was an attack on the solar-powered machines of the Matrix movies, for example, that forever blackened the sky there.

To go up against the metal threat you have... a torch. Its modular nature makes it more of a toolbox, however, with modifications to its light necessary to uncover new areas or hidden items.

Having just gone into Early Access, there's a fair way to go, and we hope the devs can stay out of the darkness long enough to get it done. ■ ***Ian Evenden***

GM Instant Reaction
THRILL-O-METER 1 2 3 4 5
Promises edge-of-the-seat stealth fun.



Format PS VR **Pub** 2K Games
Dev Gearbox **ETA** December

BORDERLANDS 2 VR

You have to do more to a game to make it VR-friendly than slap on a new control scheme, and Gearbox has supplied this by retooling Borderlands 2 – a four-player co-op open world ARPG – into a pure single-player experience. There's also a new mode, Bad-Ass Mega Fun Time, that will slow time when triggered for bullet-dodging moves. Vehicles are becoming first-person as well, with head-aimed weapons, which sounds like a recipe for motion sickness to us. Elsewhere, the cel-shaded graphics and insane weapons and characters look like being the same as they've always been. ■ *IE*



Format Switch **Pub** Warner Bros
Dev TT Games **ETA** 2 November

DIABLO III: ETERNAL COLLECTION

We assume the name means it's a collection that will last you an eternity rather than that you'll be collecting things for ever, but even though (2012 PC game) Diablo III, its expansions Reaper Of Souls and Rise Of The Necromancer, and some exclusive extras sounds like a package that'll keep you playing for a long time, there will still be a lot of loot to collect. The loot is at the heart of Diablo, and with four-player local multiplayer as well as online, there will be plenty to go around as you crawl dungeons, bash skeletons, and take on demons. ■ *IE*



Format PS4, PC **Pub** Square Enix
Dev Square Enix **ETA** 5 March 2019

LEFT ALIVE

A shooter and survival game set in the Front Mission universe (that's one populated with big stompy robots, if you're not already a fan), Left Alive comes from the metallic brains of Toshifumi Nabeshima, the man behind Armored Core V, and Metal Gear designer Yoji Shinkawa. There are three paths through the game, each taken by one of three characters, and their choices along the way have an effect on the story as it unfolds. While you will be fighting mechs, there will be infantry and vehicles to take care of, and you can do it with traps, stealth, or lots of guns. ■ *IE*



Format PS4, XO, PC **Pub** Nightdive Studios **Dev** Nightdive Studios **ETA** 2020

SYSTEM SHOCK

A playable, though glitchy and enemy-free, alpha version has been released to backers of this remake of Looking Glass's influential game. It's looking like the update will be staying extremely close to the original, with wall textures and map layouts that look just like what we played in 1994, just with massively increased resolution, and much better lit. The claustrophobic nature of the space station setting – either the ceilings are really low, or the player character is surprisingly tall – brings to mind Alien Isolation. It's a long wait until 2020, but we're glad this is still getting made. ■ *IE*


Switch & PC - October 2
Agaté
pqube
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A Hallowe'en party offers light relief after a fraught rescue, though Horace is quickly called into action once more.

Who is...



Paul Helman is a freelance videogame artist, who has "done various bits and bobs" for other studios. He first showed an early version of Horace to his friends five years ago, though he's only been working on the game full-time during the past 18 months.

Format PC **Developer** Paul Helman **ETA** Spring 2019 **Web** bit.ly/gm_horace

#1 HORACE

A story-led platformer spreading a bit of robot love

Paul Helman would like to think of his debut game as "a triple-A SNES title," and to play it is to understand why. It's an old-school platformer with plenty of contemporary bells and whistles that belie the fact it's been assembled by just one man.

Despite the console influence, from the start it pays homage to a host of vintage games: there are blink-and-you'll-miss-them nods to Emlyn Hughes Soccer and The Last Ninja during the opening scenes, while there's a (thankfully brief) Spectrum loading screen flash as the eponymous robot boots up. And its title screen music will be instantly familiar to players of a certain vintage: it's Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, which Helman cheerfully admits is a direct lift from 1984 classic Jet Set Willy.

"One of the main reasons I wanted to do chiptunes of classical music is that everyone knows it," he says. "Music is constantly used in films and TV shows, but obviously I can't end a scene by fading up an Oasis song or whatever. But I can with anything over 70 years old, thanks to the public domain."

One early sequence, for example, sees the music shift from Schubert's Unfinished Symphony to Boccherini's Minuet (Google it, you'll recognise the tune). It's a useful shorthand, Helman explains. "It instantly tells you that we're somewhere classy and a little bit old-fashioned. It's kind of a cheat, but in the same way that a film cheats to set up a scene." Indeed, the cutscenes aren't like those in many games of this ilk, which tend to use a fairly static camera and text boxes to tell their stories. Horace's tale is narrated (the robot's deadpan tone is responsible for much of the humour) with camera cuts and zooms borrowing the visual language of TV and cinema.

Wot, no skiing?

Even given Helman's experience as a digital artist, these story sequences have been a time-consuming process, and the developer concedes his ambitions have occasionally got the better of him. "If it's two or three characters having a chat framed like a sitcom I can generally get about a minute done in a day," he says.



The game's tutorial is baked into the plot, as Horace's abilities are put through their paces by his owners. That reminds us of, er, Knack. But we like this game.

"I DIDN'T WANT YOU TO GET HALFWAY THROUGH AND YOU'VE SUDDENLY GOT FLAMETHROWERS"



The game's sense of humour is on full display in the newspaper headlines that document Horace's more daring exploits, though we're not sure we approve of print media being called 'nearly dead.' *hysterical sobbing from Team GM*




Horace's tie lets you know which way is up (or down) when he's wearing his anti-gravity shoes, in case inverted bathtubs weren't clue enough.

"But with anything more action-based... there are several scenes where I've animated about a dozen characters, and that slows me down. In those cases, I'm lucky if I get ten seconds done."

The game's impressive demo suggests it's been worth the effort, the context lending extra drama to your objectives. At first, Horace is put to use as a cleaning robot, collecting bits of scrap to tidy levels up, while avoiding collapsing platforms, moving sparks and circuit-frazzling water hazards. But in another section he's tasked with rescuing a drug-addled man who's about to jump off a roof as soon as he finishes a guitar solo; later, he's asked to save a family from a burning mansion.

It's here that his most important power-up comes into play. Gravity-defying boots let him walk on walls and ceilings, and they're the only way to avoid the spreading flames.

Helman says he initially planned for the boots to arrive much later in the game. "It was the last power-up you got, and gradually I kept bringing it further and further forward. Obviously it broke all of the gameplay design at that time but once I discovered that it was incredibly fun to stick to any surface while exploring, I realised that *this* was the game." He tested the idea out by recreating World 1-1 of Super Mario Bros, and having realised how much it would fundamentally change the game, he essentially restarted work from scratch.

> LIKE THIS? TRY THIS! LIKE THIS? TRY THIS!
>
> **Try this!**
>
> **Terry Cavanagh's outstanding VVVVVV similarly features gravity-defying platforming. If we say it has its ups and downs, we mean it as a compliment.**
> **bit.ly/gm_vvvvvv**

It's certainly not the only ability you'll get your hands on, though Horace will never fire a weapon in anger. "As I'm sure you've noticed, the character is incredibly innocent," Helman says. "I didn't want you to get halfway through and you've suddenly got flamethrowers and bombs and you're going around murdering people." So instead you get a balloon that allows you to temporarily float, while a shoulder-barge lets you break through fragile walls.

Super Meat Bot

The game's later stages ramp up the challenge, though Horace's movement and inertia are just about perfect, and you're acutely aware that any deaths are nobody's fault but your own. It's no surprise, then, to learn that Super Meat Boy is one of Helman's influences – even though our robotic hero feels a good deal heavier than his fleshy counterpart. "If you're good at Meat Boy you'll get through a stage in ten seconds; if you're bad at it it will take you ten minutes. I wanted to capture that kind of feeling." Instant restarts certainly help alleviate any frustration, and you're only ever reset to the start of a room when you die.

Helman has been forced to rely on his 11-year-old nephew for constructive feedback, since the rest of his friends seem impressed – and understandably so. "Everyone I've shown it to has said, 'What are you doing? This looks like a real game made by a team of ten people!'" He laughs. "Well, that's the idea!" ■



The 60 Second Pitch

A bit of machine theory, from Paul Helman

"This is literally the first time I've had to speak to a real person about the game, so god knows! I guess it's a 2D cinematic platform adventure.

"I'm concentrating on story and general atmosphere, which isn't necessarily missing from a lot of modern indie games, but it's often very much put to the side with more gameplay-focused titles. I really wanted more of a balance between the two because I still play a lot of retro games, and I find unless they have incredible gameplay – you know, like Mario – within an hour or two there's nothing to keep me going. So I felt something with a story to help push the gameplay along would work well.

"When I sat down to write the story I wrote it with branching paths in mind, and it is very vaguely influenced by the film Being There starring Peter Sellers. I wanted to do a similar thing to that. I like the idea of this robot being effectively a fully-formed adult but with the experience of a child. That naïvete works quite well for the character."

Format PC **Developer** Gwen Frey **ETA** 2019 **Web** bit.ly/gm_kine

#2 KINE

Puzzles, and all that jazz

The breeziest, bounciest, *happiest* trailer we've seen in a long time belongs to Gwen Frey's Kine, an ingenious new puzzle game featuring a trio of sentient musical instruments. "There's just so much negativity in the world that I knew I wanted to make something light-hearted and joyful, that makes people smile," Frey says.

As founder of The Molasses Flood, Frey was at a loose end after the studio's gorgeous survival game The Flame In The Flood shipped. "I started prototyping and pitching things at work and one of them had this kernel of something interesting, which was the way that a character could move in a 3D grid," she says. "I just liked the way this character moved. I thought it looked funny." With the studio considering multiplayer for its next project, Frey found herself in a similar mindset, imagining a competitive turn-based game where players would try to push one another off a platform.

That idea didn't stick, but still there was something fascinating about this cuboid character with extendable limbs. "I had these design constraints, where the character could push off from a limb, but the limb wouldn't be able to support their weight if the body rolled off the edge of the world. And so that had to look right." Eventually, Frey realised that an accordion matched the shape she was after, but there was one problem: she wanted a jazz theme for the game. "I talked to some of my musician friends, and asked them if it was possible to have an accordion in jazz music. And they said, 'Anything's possible if you believe!'"

The idea of a jazz-centric game came from a surprising source. "I was really into La La Land," Frey says. So is the yellow body of these musical characters inspired by Emma Stone's yellow dress? "It totally is!" she beams. "It's funny you picked that up. But I've referenced La La Land imagery constantly. I thought that was a gorgeous movie."

Yet still there was something missing. It was only when Frey played Stephen Lavelle's formidable puzzler Stephen's Sausage Roll that everything started to come together. "That was the moment when it clicked," she says. "I played it and realised that all I had to do was make the levels much smaller. And within this much more constrained space, it became way more fun."

A year on, Frey has built Kine up into something special. The game's structure is like a performance, with each protagonist embarking upon a solo career, gradually unlocking new levels where they can jam with other instruments. "Each character is building a composition," Frey explains. "We're layering more and more tracks of a song, and then when you reach the end you hear the whole song and it's this huge, beautiful composition that they've made together." Is this the start of something wonderful and new? Who knows, but so far Kine seems to be very much our tempo. ■



The characters move wonderfully, but that's no great surprise: Frey was the sole animator on The Flame In The Flood.



A trombone's slide lets one character cross gaps more easily, but manoeuvring them around tight spaces is tricky.

Small... But Perfectly Formed

Test your metal with five indie games about robots



#1 MACHINARIUM

Amanita Design's gorgeous, hand-drawn point-and-clicker is as rich in life and detail as any blockbuster: you'll click on everything because you'll always get a response. And despite the rusty environments it's anything but creaky, streamlining puzzles and offering hints. A gem.



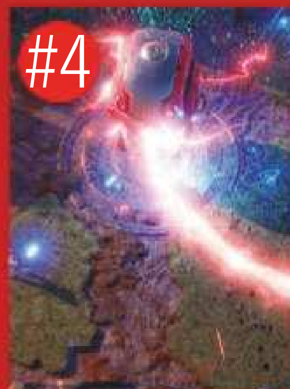
#2 STEAMWORLD DIG 2

No joints need oiling in this slick Metroidvania, which places a Nintendo-like emphasis on feel and certainly benefits from it. As the optimistic Dorothy, tasked with looking for original game protagonist Rusty, you'll carve your own path downward: it's a joy, and subtle design tricks ensure you'll never get truly lost.



#3 GROW HOME

Developed by a tiny team at Ubisoft Reflections, this casts you as BUD, a little robot who must plant seeds and climb their shoots to reach new heights. BUD's toddler-like movements as he makes his way up this ever-growing beanstalk add charm and comedy to a delightfully different adventure.



#4 NEX MACHINA

You don't actually play as a robot in this furious shooter, but there are thousands here to turn into scrap. A collaboration between Housemarque and veteran designer Eugene Jarvis, it owes plenty to Jarvis's Robotron, but has a tempo and flavour all of its own.



#5 SUBSURFACE CIRCULAR

Conceived and developed in a matter of months, Mike Bithell's lean, dialogue-led adventure follows a robot detective riding the subway and interviewing its passengers. Mixing intrigue and humour, Bithell's witty script carries the game, with stylish presentation.



Format PC **Developer** Kitfox Games **ETA** September 2019
Web bit.ly/gm_boyfriend

#3 BOYFRIEND DUNGEON

Date with the knife

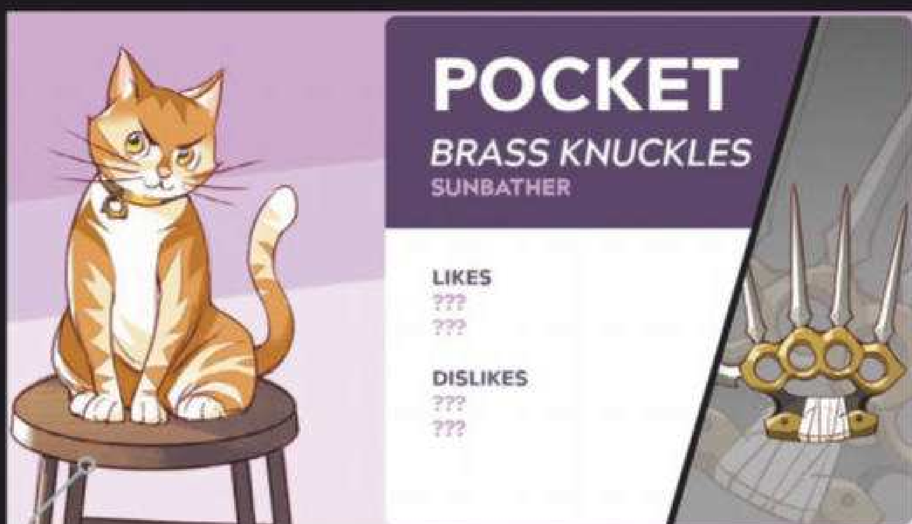
Unless you're the staunchest of pacifists, you're bound to have a favourite videogame weapon. Whether it's Hyper Light Drifter's shotgun, FEAR's, er, shotgun, or Resident Evil 4's... look, we clearly have a thing for shotguns, okay? Anyway, this successfully crowdfunded dungeon-crawler goes one step further, by letting you go on dates with these so-called 'bae blades'. Well, if nothing else, its pun game is already strong.

In this wonderfully weird piece of hack-and-slash-fiction, you'll first have to liberate these weapons from chests scattered around the isometric stages. Your stylishly-designed blade – whether it's a dagger, glaive, or lawsuit-avoiding 'lasersaber' – will transform into an equally stylish sentient being, and you can start chatting them up.

Despite the title, you're not limited to hooking up with hunks. A hammer becomes the karaoke-loving, patriarchy-smashing Leah. And if you're after cute companionship rather than romance, a set of brass knuckles becomes Pocket, a ginger cat who demands your affection. Win over your fave by saying the right things, and they'll level up, making them all the more effective.

There are nine weapons to master, and they handle differently: the dagger's all about jabbing and retreating, while the lasersaber can deal with groups and the glaive clears space if surrounded. With crisp 2D art for its dialogue sections and fast, fluid action, it looks every bit as attractive as the potential partners.

Boyfriend Dungeon sailed past its Kickstarter target within a day, eventually earning four times the original goal. No doubt that's partly down to the developer's pedigree: Kitfox Games was responsible for the enjoyable (if slight) Moon Hunters and the wonderfully atmospheric The Shrouded Isle. But it's the premise that seems to have hooked so many backers. Here's hoping the finished game's as easy to fall for as its weapons. ■



With Meg Jayanth (writer of the brilliant 80 Days) on board, Boyfriend Dungeon's script should certainly be up to scratch. Miaow.



Format PC **Developer** Els White **ETA** TBA **Web** bit.ly/gm_retrace

#4 RETRACE

The best kind of backwards step

Scary movies tend to thrive under limitations. Many of the horror genre's most influential films made a virtue of their low budget: classics like Hallowe'en, Texas Chainsaw Massacre, and The Evil Dead were made on a relative shoestring, and delivered scares despite a lack of effects.

The same is true of interactive horror: very few expensively-made games can compete with the fertile imagination of indie studios. The likes of Detention and Stories Untold – heck, even Five Nights At Freddy's – have all belied their meagre resources.

Last month, World Of Horror became another case in point, and this month has brought us a similarly narrative-led adventure. Retrace tips its hat to the Corpse Party series, as well as the much-admired Zero Escape games, blending slow-burn exploration sequences with gory action. If those influences are anything to go by, you'd be unwise to expect a happy ending.

The story, about a group of friends – quiet Freya, fearless, possibly foolhardy, Owen, cheery Mia and their pals – trapped in unfamiliar (and predictably deadly) surroundings, has an additional hook: you'll be able to rewind time when you die, using the knowledge you've gained from your unsuccessful attempts to inform your approach to the next run-through. In theory, this should let you get a little further each time – indeed, with shortcuts to unlock besides, this otherwise cruel world does occasionally remember to be kind. ■

> "BLENDS SLOW-BURN EXPLORATION WITH GORY ACTION"



Like Corpse Party, Retrace is presented from a top-down view with large, hand-painted 2D character portraits delivering the dialogue.

DICING WITH DIGITAL

The story of how a bunch of dice-rolling geeks shaped everything we love about videogames



Videogames and tabletop gaming are indisputably intertwined. The classic pen-and-paper games' idea that certain characteristics can be represented by numbers is at the beating heart of everything from the most classic fantasy RPG, to sports and racing sims.

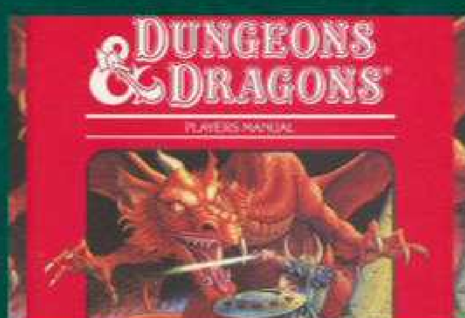
Without those dice-lobbing classics like Warhammer and D&D, this hobby of ours would never have existed. Whether it's your wizard's intelligence determining how much damage her spells do, or Lionel Messi's shot accuracy enabling him to take a long-range stab at goal, the principles (and heritage) of tabletop gaming are always present.

To tell this story, we have to go back to the early '70s, when a couple of guys named Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson were beginning to tire of playing the same old medieval war games. They had already produced one such game, titled Chainmail, so they set to work adding new rules to it, throwing powerful sorcerers, winged demons, and magical beasts onto the battlefield. It wasn't long before they trimmed down the numbers in each fight and eventually the game became entirely about the heroes and the monsters. By 1974, this game had a name, and Dungeons & Dragons became an instant hit, especially with members of the burgeoning computer-gaming scene.

It was those tech enthusiasts who, having played some extremely basic text-based adventures, thought it might

"WITHOUT THOSE DICE-LOBBING CLASSICS LIKE WARHAMMER AND D&D, THIS HOBBY OF OURS WOULD NEVER HAVE EXISTED"


Baldur's Gate introduced a whole generation of gamers to concepts like 'armor class', as well as the awesome Forgotten Realms fantasy setting.





be fun to try replicating D&D on their computers. In the late '70s a couple of those guys, Michael Toy and Glenn Wichman, were studying at the University Of California. They felt that both computer games and tabletop adventures suffered from the same issue: a lack of replayability. They soon found a very elegant solution to this in the form of procedural generation, which enabled the dungeon to be completely different each time they played. They called their new game Rogue, and 40 years later we still refer to games following the formula it laid out as 'roguelikes'.

Apple for the creature

At around the same time, in the state of Texas, a young gamer named Richard Garriott had also been inspired by pen-and-paper RPGs like D&D. However, Garriott's concern was less with replayability and more with immersion. How could an electronic RPG make the player feel like they were really there, exploring the depths of a dungeon? The solution was simple: draw the graphics from the perspective of the player.

While there had been first-person games before, this one made use of the shiny new colour monitors that came with the Apple II and, consequently, was in a league of its own. Exploring the overworld map and then switching to first-person view for a dungeon delve was utterly revolutionary for the time, and set the standard for RPGs for generations to come. This game, titled Akalabeth, would go on to be the opening chapter in Garriott's highly influential Ultima series, with games like Ultima VII setting the standard for modern RPGs. Things that we consider basic today, such as NPCs having a daily routine, or your party members being controlled by an AI, were all first seen in the Ultima games. But more importantly, they stemmed from the games of D&D being played around Richard Garriott's dining room table.

By the late '80s many of the ideas from tabletop gaming had become standard for videogames. Titles like Final Fantasy and Wizardry were using terms such as 'hit points' and 'healing potion'. Turn-based combat, with characters often going in order of who had the highest speed or agility, was the norm. In fact, back then many gamers didn't really draw much of a distinction between tabletop gaming and computer gaming. Dragon magazine, a publication created specifically for Dungeons & Dragons fans, would regularly review and talk about computer games alongside figurines and manuals. However, there was still one mountain that we had yet to conquer. Nobody had managed to take the core of the D&D ruleset and turn it into a computer game. But all that was about to change.

This might be hard to believe in the age of Skyrim and The Last Of Us, but there was once a time when game designers basically had to choose between mechanics and story. In 1988 it was widely believed that there simply wasn't enough space on a disc, or enough memory in a computer, to craft a decent representation of D&D. The game's ever-writhing mixture of complex numerical mechanics and emergent storytelling was seen as something that only a human could do. Well, while discs





Until Neverwinter Nights hit the AOL servers back in 1991, online multiplayer games were played using text and numbers. Neverwinter Nights was worth every darn penny!

From console to tabletop

Conversions we need to see



Dark Soles

A guessing game in which you turn off the lights and see if you can guess which celebrity's shoe-print you're touching.



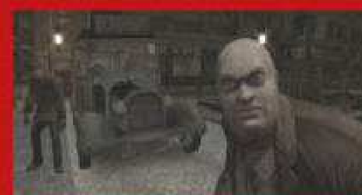
League Of Legends: The Board Game

A party game where the purpose is to be as verbally abusive to the other team as possible.



Metal Gear: The Gathering

Collect as many cards as you can before Konami announces a new set that replaces the deck you just spent £500 on.



Call Of Duty Of Cthulhu

An eldritch horror RPG in which you investigate an illness that's causing millions of people to buy the same game every year.



PaRappa the Rapper Mahjong

This can be basically anything because nobody really understands what mahjong is anyway.

Honourable mentions

A few tabletop trailblazers that deserve a shoutout



Dungeon (1975)

It's disputed to this day what the first ever CRPG was, but most people agree it was Don Daglow's Dungeon that started it all.



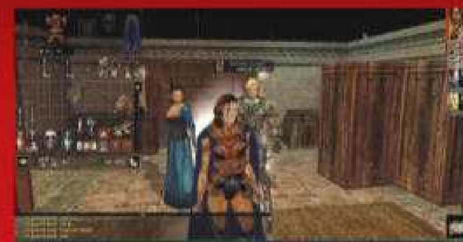
D&D: Shadow Over Mystara (1996)

This game cleverly took the feel of D&D and melded it with the mechanics of an arcade beat-'em-up.



Warhammer: Dark Omen (1998)

Total War might be the king of epic battles but Dark Omen really pioneered this kind of large-scale warfare.



Neverwinter Nights (2002)

Not to be confused with the 1991 release of the same name, NWN had a very strong modding community.

and computer memory back then *were* minuscule compared to what we're used to playing with today, Strategic Simulations Inc proved they could carry a full-blooded RPG by releasing Pool Of Radiance, a D&D adventure set in the city of Phlan. There were some concessions made, such as the game prompting you to read chunks of dialogue from specific pages of the manual to conserve space on the disc. Still, Pool Of Radiance was a true conversion of the D&D rules for home computers, and a hugely successful, landmark title.



"IN 1991, AOL CHARGED ITS USERS THE EQUIVALENT OF £7.50 PER HOUR TO PLAY NEVERWINTER NIGHTS"

Also around this time, a new thing called the internet was making its way into homes, and once again it was a bunch dice-rolling gamers who found a way to integrate it with the computer games they played. In 1991, SSI released Neverwinter Nights, the world's first-ever graphical MMORPG, also set in the D&D universe. AOL charged its users the equivalent of £7.50 per hour to play Neverwinter Nights. To put that into perspective, the price of the new Spider-Man game would have got you seven hours of online gaming back in 1991. Neverwinter Nights proved that gamers were willing to pay a premium for online experiences, creating a model that everything from Xbox Live to World Of Warcraft is still based around. Thankfully, it's a little less pricy in 2018!

Doctors and dragons

Meanwhile, in the Canadian city of Edmonton, three doctors were getting tired of programming medical software. They'd spend their evenings playing tabletop war games, and running D&D campaigns. They felt their programming knowledge, combined with their love of gaming, made them ideal candidates to create compelling RPGs for PC. By February 1995, they had decided to quit their jobs as doctors and set up a game development studio. As a nod to their medical backgrounds, they called the firm Bioware. Its first title, Shattered Steel, was inspired by the tabletop wargame BattleTech and achieved modest success, but it was Bioware's second title, Baldur's Gate, that really broke new ground.

Once again based on the Dungeons & Dragons ruleset, Baldur's Gate is widely regarded as being responsible for reviving the stagnant computer RPG. By 1998, when it was released, the world had already seen Final Fantasy VII, and we knew what kind of free-flowing, story-driven awesomeness an RPG was capable of. The first-person, turn-based drudgery of games like Pool Of Radiance was no longer cutting it.

Baldur's Gate not only bragged amazing 3D graphics, but it had something totally new to RPGs in the form of choices and consequences. Should you fight the drunk in the tavern, or should you try to understand why he's upset? Should you rescue the mage who





Even an FPS like Overwatch owes its existence to early pen-and-paper titles, especially given the strong RPG mechanics that drive its class-based gameplay.



Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines (2004)

Almost unplayable on release, but after years of fan patches it's now the best bloodsucker out there.



Divinity: Original Sin 2 (2017)

Has a GM mode which allows four players to run through an adventure controlled by a fifth 'game master'.



is under attack or let her assailants take her away? These were the kinds of moral conundrums you'd often be faced with in a pen-and-paper RPG, but videogames were linear, they had a set path with a pre-determined cast of characters. The game's engine was appropriately called the Infinity Engine, and went on to be used for an insane number of games. Parts of it were still being used on titles like The WItcher and Dragon Age II (albeit in a heavily upgraded form).

Tabletop's turned

Over the following years, many notable tabletop-inspired videogames would redefine their various genres. Relic Entertainment's tenure as developer of Warhammer 40K games springs instantly to mind. However, it eventually began to seem as though everything had RPG mechanics. In some ways this was awesome, with first-person shooters like Overwatch and Team Fortress 2 pushing the genre forward with classes and cooldown timers. Yet some of the less desirable elements of modern gaming, such as the excessive use of lootboxes, are a direct descendant of the loot drops of those early RPGs.

In an unpredictable turn of events, RPG elements becoming common in many non-RPG videogames seems to have sparked a resurgence of interest in tabletop games. Last year, they were responsible for a quarter of all money made on Kickstarter. In fact, we're now even seeing board games sold within videogames, with titles like 2015's Tabletop Simulator providing a digital store for real-world products, to be played on a virtual tabletop.

The massive success of recent videogame-to-tabletop adaptations like the Dark Souls and Bloodborne card/board games have proved that the fan bases for the two hobbies are moving ever closer together. Other titles are drawing more directly on tabletop games just like the earliest videogame RPGs – the forthcoming Call Of Cthulhu's mechanics are taken from its tabletop ancestor. Once again, just like in those early days back in Dragon magazine, many gamers no longer draw a distinction between these two fantasy-filled hobbies.

Regardless of whether you grew up playing on a controller or with a set of dice, one thing's for certain: these two hobbies have a symbiotic relationship and the future of that relationship will be filled with awesome ideas and technological marvels. ■



Tabletop Simulator provides a virtual space in which to play anything, from Battletech to remote-control car racing.

HOW WE SCORE

0-39 Awful Avoid it as you would a bullet with your name on.
40-59 Poor Major issues here that won't be solved with a hug.
60-69 Decent A mixed bag filled with sweets and sharp stones.
70-79 Good Some flaws, but still a very enjoyable experience.
80-89 Excellent Buy it, love it, thank us when you're done.
90-100 Outstanding A rare and essential piece of brilliance.

The small print: We rate games in comparison to what else is available on the same system, in the same genre, and for the same format at the time of release. So this year's FIFA might score less than a FIFA from three years ago, but still be a better game. Because time, and our expectations, move on. Hey, you're smart, you get it...



Not awarded based simply on score, but rather given to games that possess a special blend of qualities. For instant classics that you won't regret owning.

Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Québec **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

Everything is permitted as Assassin's Creed ventures to Ancient Greece





The reinvention of Assassin's Creed continues apace. Following Bayek's Egyptian adventures in last year's fantastic Assassin's Creed Origins, Ubisoft Québec takes the series back another 300 years to Ancient Greece at the onset of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. It's certainly a bold choice, Spartan-kicking any notion of the assassin-versus-Templar soap opera at the heart of the series' mythos off the nearest cliff. Yet the setting of an Assassin's Creed game is often its most crucial aspect, and this inviting world is worth exploring to its fullest.

Taking a gander at the map in Assassin's Creed Odyssey doesn't quite tell you how mammoth this sprawling open world actually is. If you want to get into the nitty-gritty statistics, Ubisoft claims this play space is 1.6 times larger than Origins' Ancient Egypt, and that was no slouch when it comes to comprehensive sandboxes. It's a staggeringly large world, encompassing both land and the Aegean sea as you hop from horseback to sailing the choppy waves at the helm of a trireme. When you're part of the way through the game and your quest log is full of activities spread across the peninsula, it can feel overwhelming. But Odyssey's exhaustive scale is merited; every inch of its recreation of Ancient Greece containing something worth seeking out. There's a consistent sense of adventure and discovery that few other open worlds can match.

Greece is the word

Structurally, Odyssey is similar to Origins on paper, with points of interest represented by question marks that appear on the overworld map and your on-screen compass. While each area is gated by your character level and gear in classic RPG fashion, Odyssey does a good job of subtly guiding your trek across Greece so that you won't reach impassable areas unless you actively seek them out. Otherwise, you're free to wander as you see fit: diving into the depths of a flooded temple surrounded by ravenous sharks, venturing deeper and deeper between the encroaching trees of a verdant forest, clearing a path through an Athenian encampment with the tip of your spear, or digging your toes into the sun-blasted white sand of a secluded island. There's so much to see and do, and even the most mundane tasks rarely ever feel like busywork purely because of the frequency of rewards, both visual and practical.



There are a few rough edges when you look too close – textures taking too long to load, basic NPC character models – but Odyssey is a genuinely beautiful game, and its use of colour stands out above all else. The world is picturesque, vibrant, and awash with earthy tones, blossoming pink leaves, and delicately painted marble. Windswept fields of

> "EVERY INCH OF ODYSSEY'S ANCIENT GREECE CONTAINS SOMETHING WORTH SEEKING OUT"



What do Ancient Greeks wear with jeans? Socra-tees.

The Spartans and Athenians are nicely colour-coded, so you've no excuse for accidentally killing the wrong ones.





Climb any hilltop, mountain, or temple, and you'll be rewarded with a fantastic view of this incredible open world.

flowers lead to cliffs, and the sun glistens off the ocean upon reaching its highest point. Venture into a city like Athens, and you'll find the streets adorned with statues of warriors, poets, and philosophers, and opulent temples to the gods that sit in stark contrast to the ramshackle huts and bustling markets of the city's poorer district. Time and weather make a difference too; the day/night cycle alters the mood and the population's movement, while fog drifting into a valley can turn the atmosphere eerie, and thrashings of rain and lightning will batter your ship's hull. There's a phenomenal sense of place to every inch of Odyssey's Ancient Greece, each new hillside or settlement on the horizon offering the possibility of new adventures and sights to soak in.

Ubisoft Québec knows this, and so it's implemented an Exploration mode that actively encourages you to take in your surroundings. Rather than provide you with a quest marker that points to the exact location of any given mission, in this optional mode you'll have to match geographical clues people pass on in conversation with what you see. It's up to you to determine where the location is based on this information, and while it's never particularly difficult to do, it's still rewarding to uncover areas on your own as opposed to following a marker directly to them. We can't count the number of times we mistakenly stumbled into a key story mission without realising it, and this natural discovery is an inherently brilliant aspect of Odyssey's open world design.

This is also one example of the ways in which Odyssey builds on the RPG systems established in Origins while adding a few wrinkles of its own. From the offset, you're asked to choose whether to play as a man or a woman. Siblings Alexios and Kassandra are effectively the same character, with the same lines of dialogue and story beats, but Kassandra's voice acting is the better of the two, and a lot of the questlines suit her character down to a tee.

Arcs to grind

There are three main story arcs in total, with the primary focus on an endearing personal family drama. In a move that pushes the series further into the malleable world of RPGs, Odyssey contains dialogue options – the first time they've featured in an Assassin's Creed game. Not every decision carries meaning, instead allowing you to shape the kind of person Alexios or Kassandra are – including some underwhelming romance options. But some of your choices do carry consequences that can shape the greater world around you, altering the game's ending, opening up additional side-missions, and determining whether some characters live or die. Choice, cause and effect, and personality-shaping dialogue options are welcome additions to the familiar series, giving you the feeling that what you're doing is genuinely having an effect on the course of the action.

The notion of choice carries over into combat, too, which is as fast-paced and fluid as it was in Origins. There are

"PUSHING THE SERIES FURTHER INTO THE WORLD OF RPGS, ODYSSEY CONTAINS DIALOGUE OPTIONS"



WANTED: DEAD OR... WELL, DEAD

The hunt is on

Engage in enough combat and you'll eventually garner the attention of someone willing to pay to snuff you out. Once your notoriety goes up, the bounty hunters come out to play.

This works similarly to Shadow Of Mordor's Nemesis system, as a near-endless array of rival mercenaries with their own backstories and loot come looking to collect the bounty on your head. They're often a chaotic wild card, showing up at the least opportune time to spoil your plans. Fighting them is a thrill, and their presence makes the world feel more reactive.





Like Bayek, Alexios and Kassandra have a handy feathered friend who acts like a sort of natural UAV.





Want to fill Twitter with your favourite snaps? Picture mode is only one button press away.



PREPARE FOR GLORY

Swords clash and shields break in battle

The ongoing conflict between the Athenians and Spartans is generally left to stew in the background throughout Assassin's Creed Odyssey's narrative. Instead, the protracted war is confined to its own mode, dubbed Conquest Battles. Each region in Ancient Greece is controlled by one of the two warring factions. You can stroke the flames of war by dismantling a faction's influence in a particular area by burning and stealing its resources, killing its soldiers, and assassinating its leaders.

Once their influence has been sapped, you can trigger a large-scale battle between the two forces wherein you can choose to fight for the defending faction or the attacking one, with your final reward varying depending on your choice (and we'd advise you to pick off the commanders for best results).

These sizable battles are impressive due to the sheer number of soldiers on screen at any one time, but the implementation of this mode feels disconnected from the rest of the game, especially when the main story has you helping one faction while you're actively sabotaging them in the side content. This results in a jarring feeling that puts the game at odds with itself, and the rewards you receive are never meaningful enough to justify the time it takes to earn them. It's disappointing that the Peloponnesian War is mostly confined to this mode, as opposed to fitting into the context of the main story. It feels like a waste.

standard light and heavy attacks, plus parry and dodge moves that let you avoid danger and counterattack if your timing's right. Weapons are just varied enough, and there's a good variety of enemy types with different attack patterns to be wary of. Odyssey still runs into problems when you're fighting more than one enemy at a time. Switching targets is a little too finicky, and there are no notifications for when incoming melee attacks are off-screen, which can obviously be frustrating. But its dynamism still excels in one-on-one duels, particularly once you begin to experiment with the multitude of options at your fingertips.

As you accrue XP and level up your character, you can spend skill points on three branching trees that also correlate to three damage types: assassin, warrior, and hunter. Each is pretty self-explanatory, focusing on stealth, melee combat, and ranged attacks respectively, and developing your character to suit your playstyle is key. Weapons and armour come in four increasingly powerful rarity levels, with each piece buffing one of the three aforementioned damage types. You can specialise in mastering one of these paths or create a balanced build that dabbles in all three. Whichever way you choose to go, you'll have plenty of options to hand for damaging your opponents, from a useful skill that rips an enemy's shield out of their hand and clonks them over the head with it, to another that charges up arrows for devastatingly brutal shots, and a 300-style Spartan kick that will send any unfortunate soul caught at the end of your boot careening through the air.

Mything in action

Odyssey embraces the intrinsic absurdity of Assassin's Creed with these abilities, going so far as to feature supernatural skills that tie into the series' lore. The mystical Spear Of Leonidas that Alexios and Kassandra wield can be hurled at distant enemies, teleporting you along with it. There are also ghostly arrows that can pass through shields, enemies, and walls, and the hunt for First Civilisation artefacts expands on these powers, pitting you against mythological creatures like Medusa and the Minotaur in some memorable encounters.

Naval combat and exploration make a return, presenting some of the game's most visually thrilling moments. Seafaring isn't as fleshed out as it was in Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, which is understandable considering it's a much smaller part of the action this time, but there are still customisation options, upgrades to consider, and lieutenants to recruit. Peppering a rival ship with flaming arrows and javelins is inherently satisfying, as is sending its crew plunging into the jaws of the bloodthirsty sharks lurking beneath the waves.

There are also multi-faceted Conquest battles to ignite and partake in, a notoriety system that sends a seemingly endless gaggle of rival mercenaries after your head, tombs to raid, mystical beasts to hunt, historical figures to rub shoulders with, daily quests to complete, outposts to plunder, and everything else in between. Odyssey's exhaustive scope is admirable, even if not all of its systems stick the landing. The campaign's pacing can bog down at times, particularly when there's a lot of travel involved, and the dumb-as-bricks AI means stealth isn't as engaging as it could be. Nevertheless, the superb attention to detail, memorable characters, intriguing narrative, expansive RPG mechanics, and a dynamic open world that's a joy to explore, ensure Odyssey represents Assassin's Creed at its brilliant best. ■

GM LOVES...

- The open world is huge, beautiful, and mysterious.
- There's so much choice, from dialogue to your loadout.

GM HATES...

- Combat occasionally falters when facing multiple enemies.
- Conquest Battles relegate the ongoing war to a shallow mode.

Better than...



Spartan: Total Warrior
Creative Assembly did the whole Spartan thing back in 2004 with this derivative hack-and-slasher. Its scale was impressive, though.

Worse than...



The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
Assassin's Creed Odyssey was clearly inspired by CD Projekt Red's seminal, sprawling RPG, but we have to give the edge to Geralt and co.

ONLINE



Visit a mercenary board to find daily quests that reward you with orichalcum ore upon completion. Trade this with Sargon the merchant for legendary and epic gear that rotates out each week.

GM JUDGEMENT

88%



Ancient Greece is an enticing place to explore, while the series' RPG mechanics continue to improve.
Richard Wakeling



The Glenfinnan viaduct is famous for having featured in four Harry Potter films. No cameos for the wizard here, though.

YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL, IT'S TRUE

Taking snaps with Photo mode

It's impossible not to salivate over Forza Horizon 4's graphics via the game's photo mode. Here are some of our fave shots.







Format XO (reviewed), PC **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** Playground Games **ETA** Out Now **Players** 1-12

FORZA HORIZON 4

I've been driving in my car, sometimes it's a Jaguar

For the first time in its six-year history, the Horizon festival has made its way to Great Britain. Yet unlike real life, there are extended periods of sun, the motorways aren't jammed with traffic, and your car won't disappear if you leave it down a dark alley. The perfect getaway, then, particularly when you factor in the seamless mesh of arcade and simulation gameplay, set amid an expansive and gorgeous-looking sandbox that would satisfy everyone from Jenson Button to James Bond.

Horizon's take on Britain favours lush landscapes over city life for the most part, offering a unique representation of the island. It's largely separated into country roads, villages, and landmarks, with British staples like the Glenfinnan viaduct and Chesterton windmill featuring as detailed beauty spots. Edinburgh's the major city in the game, recreated in impressive style, complete with the iconic Edinburgh castle and Scott monument, but no hen parties.

These handpicked bits of Britain are sprinkled throughout the map, and meticulous attention to detail brings them to life. You find yourself slowing down to analyse the perfect replications of road signs and markings, and peering into the warm glow of cottage windows to see if you can spot anything (strangely, this doesn't result in you being pursued by the police). Instead of concrete walls, you'll smash through wooden fences and stone-built structures, sending individual pebbles flying into the air.

It's great to see Horizon focusing on the less-explored areas of videogame Britain, and the rural bias offers plenty of potential for high-speed driving. But like Horizon 3's Australia, the ratio feels just a little off, and it would have been nice to see more diverse city settings. Even so, you'll be mesmerised by Horizon's alluring vision of Blighty and will find yourself reaching for photo mode at practically every turn.

> "YOU WILL FIND YOURSELF REACHING FOR PHOTO MODE AT PRACTICALLY EVERY TURN"

'Tis the season

Horizon 4's map of Britain boasts a notable advantage over its predecessor – the addition of seasons. It dramatically changes the way the world looks and operates, resulting in four very different environments. Taking on any type of race in the winter requires a different approach to tackling it in the summer, while spring and autumn also offer unique weather conditions.

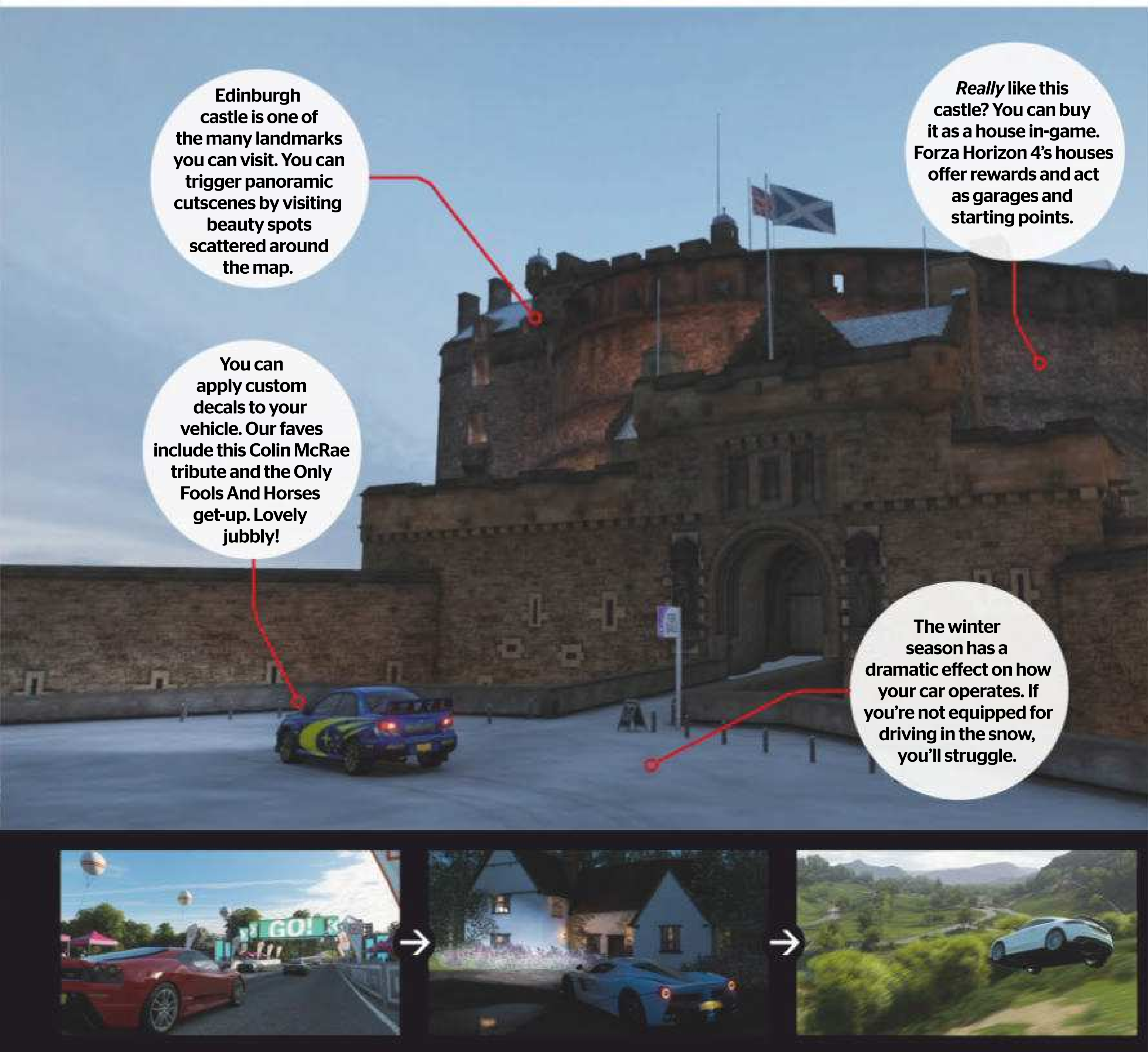
You get to experience them all in the first few hours, with the Horizon Festival

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Yes, there's a Halo level

The most bizarre addition in Forza Horizon 4 is that of a Halo Experience Showcase. It's basically a big excuse to drive a Warthog round the rolling hills of the home nations while suited up as Master Chief.

Even so, it makes for a fun few minutes. Cortana provides a humorous commentary on the perplexing nature of modern-day Britain throughout the race (heck, modern-day Britain perplexes *us* and we live here), which sees you competing with Banshees and other Warthogs as you sprint to the finish. If you're a Forza fan, you'll remember the Warthog was also included in Horizon 3, and like in that game, you can optionally choose to unlock it for casual driving outside the Showcase event.



qualifying period spanning a full year in-game. Completing events, acquiring influence, and taking part in bombastic Showcase events progresses you to the next stage, and after this the game truly opens up, turning seasons into live weekly events. Each week brings new season-specific challenges and rewards, and it all takes place within seamless online worlds of up to 72 players.

Other areas of the game also rely on live and ever-changing content, the best example being Forzathon Live. These are hourly challenges that appear in a predetermined location on the map, tasking players with setting group targets as a collective. It's a welcome focus on co-op play, offering a necessary break from the norm, *and* you're rewarded with points to spend in the seasonal shop.

The plentiful map-based events are excellently varied, and revealed at a satisfying pace. You'll have all sorts of ways to suit up behind the wheel, with everything from rally races, to stunt shows offering unique ways to tackle Britain's roads. As always, Forza Horizon 4 offers very few restrictions on how you can choose to play, allowing you to take on the AI, partner with a friend, or compete on reliable servers against players from across the globe.

A new way to play this year is Team Adventure mode, which throws you into team-based races, games, or a mixture of the two. You don't have to join an official team – unranked play is an option – but doing so offers perks such as cars and mode-specific customisation rewards. There's a good range of activities to take part in, and the seasons change with each completed event, helping to keep you interested in the long term.

Horizon Blueprints also return as a way of creating custom race types to play with others, and a free Route Creator is set to be added by the time you read this, allowing you to design your own races from scratch. The hills and winding roads of Britain offer excellent potential for this feature, and assuming it goes off without a hitch, there's real scope for the Route Creator to become one of the series' biggest highlights.

Stylin' and profilin'

There's a greater focus away from the racetrack this year, too. The ability to customise your character is ramped up in Forza Horizon 4, with a stylish selection of outfits and emotes to collect. Pre-race loading screens and victory sequences can now showcase everything from flossing to Fresh Prince-inspired dances such as the 'Carlton'. The only thing that's disappointing is how limited the character creation suite is, being restricted to just a few preset models.

Improvements have been made to both the quantity and upgradability of the car roster. You've now got over 450 cars to acquire, and all of them boast the outstanding level of realistic detail we've come to expect from the series. The handling differences from season to season will encourage you to switch up your chosen rides, and each car boasts its own perk tree, offering tailor-made benefits to spend your hard-earned skill points on.

The car customisation suite itself remains impressively deep – you can even set your horn to toot the Windows XP theme if you so choose. The only audio-related down side is the absence of Groove Music, which acted as the custom radio station in Horizon 3. Due to the service's partial closure, there's no longer a way of importing your own tunes into the game, and while the soundtrack remains somewhat agreeable, we find the radio stations struggle to retain their appeal for long.

But soundtrack issues and the like are the most minuscule of dents in Forza Horizon 4's bodywork; the rest of the package remains sparkling. It's undoubtedly the most fully-featured and accessible open world driving game we've seen, with new features ensuring enjoyable racing for weeks and months to come. Whether you're a hardcore racing nut or you're brand new to the genre, you'll want to exhaust all that Horizon 4's Britain has to offer. ■

What happens to a frog's car when it breaks down? It gets toad away!

GM LOVES...

- It's gorgeous to look at, and packed with content.
- Live seasons result in a diverse and ever-changing world.

GM HATES...

- There are not nearly enough cities on the map.
- You can no longer cruise to your own tunes in-game.

Better than...



Need For Speed Payback
The latest entry in EA's long-running series does plenty of things right, but falls short of Horizon's polished quality, accessibility, and longevity.

Worse than...



Forza Motorsport 7
Horizon 4 offers an outstanding blend of arcade and simulation gameplay, but if you're a simulation purist, this might suit you better.

DLC



James Bond features as part of the game's DLC, which allows you to drive some of the British agent's famous rides, such as the Aston Martin DB5 from Goldfinger (with revolving number plate!).

GM JUDGEMENT

91%



The series' most polished, action-packed entry yet. A glorious celebration of open-world racing.
Fraser Gilbert

Each planet is made up of various colourful biomes, which blend together smoothly, if not especially seamlessly.

Format Switch, PS4, XO **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Toronto **ETA** Out now **Players** 1-2

STARLINK: BATTLE FOR ATLAS

The continued adventures of Star Fox? Don't toy with us

It's hard to talk about Starlink: Battle For Atlas without mentioning all the games it borrows from. Playing it, you can practically smell the whiteboard in Ubisoft's Toronto office, marker-pen lines linking 'No Man's Sky' with 'Destiny', and a big circle drawn around the words 'toys to life'. Because, yes, like Skylanders and Disney Infinity before it, this is one of those games that comes with plastic models – in this case, controller-sized spaceships and their tiny pilots – which can be connected to unlock their digital counterparts.

Let's talk about those toys first, because they are really lovely. Each of the six ships has a distinctive and eye-catching design, ranging from a bulbous alien craft to the sharp speedy angles of what is basically an X-wing with the serial numbers filed off.

When you're handling them, the models have a pleasingly chunky quality that brings to mind another word which surely appeared on that imaginary whiteboard: Lego. While you don't actually build the ships, they are deeply customisable. Each craft is made up of a chassis and two removable wings.

This means you can snap the wings off one model and apply them to another – backwards or upside down or even on top of the existing wing, if you like. Then you choose your weapons, and stick those on in a similar fashion. As long as it's all attached to the controller mount, Starlink will recognise the changes and instantly update your ride in-game.

Want to create something that has three mismatched wings piled on top of another on one side, and a single gun, pointing backwards, on the other? The result might not look especially aerodynamic, but you will be able to fly your personalised unwieldy monstrosity around the galaxy.

Clicking a new weapon onto the mount and seeing it immediately appear on screen has a novelty that takes a long while to wear off. But what about the game beneath it all?

> "LIKE ITS SPACESHIPS, STARLINK IS MADE UP OF COMPONENTS THAT SNAP NEATLY TOGETHER"

Foxy unboxing

Like its spaceship models, Starlink is made up of components that snap neatly together. The game opens among the stars, introducing itself as a space dogfighting game that recalls Nintendo's Star Fox series. Not least because, if you're playing on Switch, the starter pack includes models of both an Arwing and Fox McCloud himself. With no official Star Fox game made for Switch – and arguably, no worthy instalments since the N64 days – Starlink is the next best thing. Better, in fact.

These are some of the best dogfights ever to grace consoles, perfectly capturing that X-wing fantasy we've all harboured since childhood. The sensation of connecting a brightly-coloured laser beam with an enemy ship, causing it to spiral into space and eventually explode (concepts like



ZERO FOX GIVEN

Every McCloud has a silver lining

Starlink manages not only to squeeze in the entire Star Fox crew – Fox, Falco, Peppy, and Slippy – but makes their presence in the Atlas system feel surprisingly organic. They're on a mission to hunt down longtime nemesis Star Wolf, which brings them into the company of the main cast, and supplies Fox with his own side-quests. It's hard to spot the seams between these missions and the base game, and their slightly cheesy Saturday-morning cartoon voice acting fits in perfectly. And yes, that immortal barrel roll-related catchphrase get deployed the first chance the game gets.





The crew is based out of the Equinox, which looks like someone tipped the USS Enterprise over on its side.





The non-aggressive lifeforms you encounter have charmingly alien designs. This is a Vibrosaur.



AS SEEN ON TV

How Starlink borrows from Overwatch

The practice of making a television series or film specifically so it can produce a lucrative toy line is common enough that there's a dedicated word for it: toyetic. But Starlink kind of goes the other way. The game and its accompanying toys are so lovingly created, so well thought out, it feels like they're begging for a proper TV adaptation to back them up.

The game's cutscenes have the stylings and production values of a computer-animated kids' show – and we mean that in a good way. There's not a lot of blue sky between the crew of Starlink's Equinox, with their personalised spacecraft, and the residents of Tracy Island, except that Starlink's cast are individualised in a way that far exceeds 'the one with the green sash'. There are aliens both fury and scaly, an irritating YouTuber, a metalhead engineer, a gunslinging cowboy version of Groot (needless to say, our favourite), and a guy who, there are no two ways about it, looks a remarkable amount like Hanzo.

Which raises another strong gaming influence on Starlink: Blizzard's Overwatch. With the help of its character-focused shorts, that game has made an enormous virtue of its two dozen playable heroes, and Ubisoft seems to have been taking notes. In creating Starlink, it seems the company doesn't just want to make the next Skylanders, it wants characters who can exist outside of the game. As a line of toys, perhaps.

Which model has a future beyond Starlink being packed away? The Arwing, already enjoying pride of place on Alex's bookshelf.

'realism' and 'physics are thankfully cast aside) is brilliant.

To keep space combat feeling fresh, there are plenty of little tricks to discover. Incoming fire can be bounced back using your ship's reflective shields or dodged with a variety of evasive manoeuvres. Each pilot also has their own gradually-charging special ability, which might call in an orbital strike, slow down time or, in Fox's case, summon one of his wingmates to help out in the fight.

No Man's Skylanders

It's not all dogfights, though. Between combat encounters, you're free to explore the galaxy, visiting any planet you can see. It's hard not to think of No Man's Sky, especially when you arrive on a new world and are greeted with that familiar colour palette, seemingly lifted off the cover of a 1970s sci-fi paperback.

The best moment of exploration is undoubtedly picking out a strange shape on a planet's surface, big enough to be visible from space, and burning down through its atmosphere to find out what it actually is. The worst is the travel that connects these moments, long stretches of empty starfield punctuated only by the odd asteroid field. You'll find yourself wishing for the hyperspace traps that space pirates lay down for you, just to break up the monotony.

Like No Man's Sky, each planet has its own distinctive flora and fauna to discover, and resources to mine. There's a neat little DNA scanning minigame, where you have to do a full 360° around a creature – often while trying to keep up with it as it tries to flee, or avoiding the sweep of its gargantuan tail.

Unlike No Man's Sky, though, you never disembark from your spacecraft. You can fly through the skies or switch into a mode that's more podracer than X-wing. There's a remarkable sense of speed as you skim across the surface, and a pleasant floatiness to the way any bumps or ramps carry you into the sky. Unfortunately, this makes for a strange fit with some of the ground-level activities, such as opening crates and discovering secret entrances, which feel like they've been plucked from games like Destiny. Games that feature player characters who can actually stand still for a second.

It's a similar story with earthbound combat. This uses the same solid fundamentals as dogfighting, but they're not as well suited to encounters where your enemies have legs. Because your targets aren't as mobile, there's not the same challenge of lining up a single shot. To account for that, the game either mobs you with baddies or makes them bullet sponges, which robs your weapons of any impact.

Starlink tries its hardest to overcome this, through a mechanic rooted in its toy-connected design. Each weapon deals a certain type of elemental damage – fire, ice, gravity and so on – that has a Pokémon-style matchup with enemy types. Trying to freeze an ice giant, for example, might only make them stronger, but hitting them with a flamethrower should be super-effective. It's a smart way of encouraging you to constantly change tactics by snapping a new gun onto your ship mid-combat – and, cynically, of encouraging you to buy a new pack to get the right weapon for the situation – but it still feels like it's playing second fiddle to the dogfights.

This, ultimately, is the down side of constructing a game out of borrowed parts. There's a definite novelty to seeing unlikely components mixed and matched, and they might even click together neatly. But unless each part is carefully considered, you risk ending up with something slightly unwieldy. ■

GM LOVES...

- ✓ Fiddling with toy parts to build our own spaceship.
- ✓ Blasting villains while making our own TIE fighter sound FX.

GM HATES...

- ✗ Being in space with nothing to do but hold the hyperdrive button.
- ✗ Fighting on land, which isn't worthy of our DIY sound FX.

Better than...



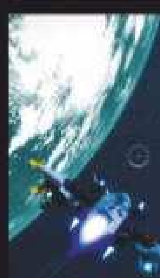
Star Fox Zero
Fox's last foray, on the doomed Wii U, wasn't exactly a classic. Starlink ditches the motion controls and ends up top dogfighter.

Worse than...



No Man's Sky
Hello Games' procedurally-generated explore-'em-up has come a long way from its rocky launch, and offers a much bigger universe.

NEED TO KNOW



Starlink offers that rarest of things in the modern age – a split-screen co-op mode. If you're playing on Switch, though, you'll have to plug into a telly if you want to play with a friend.

GM JUDGEMENT

62%



A fascinating combination of gaming trends that doesn't quite stick the landing.
Alex Spencer

GM Review
The Final Verdict!



Brock Lesnar is the joint highest-rated Superstar in WWE 2K19, sharing his 93 overall rating with The Rock.







Format PS4 (reviewed), XO, PC **Publisher** 2K Sports **Developer** Yuke's, Visual Concepts **ETA** Out now **Players** 1-6

WWE 2K19

This one's a real slobberknocker

"The most focused, craziest fans are WWE fans, Kiss fans, and Star Wars fans. They complain, but they love it, and they're there for life," declared wrestler Chris Jericho on a 2017 episode of Larry King Now. While that statement may ring true, recent WWE games have struggled to enthral the millions of fans they did in their heyday. This year's effort feels like a milestone moment, rewriting many of last year's wrongs while laying foundations for the future. After five years, 2K's take on sports entertainment is finally realising its potential.

If you're familiar with current-gen WWE games, you'll know what to expect between the ropes. The action largely still takes an authentic approach, but 2K has upped the pace slightly, resulting in a more fluid feel. The new Payback system works to shift momentum, granting special abilities such as finishers and cheating manoeuvres when you're struggling, helping to keep things competitive. Additional new mechanics remain minimal, but years' worth of mechanics innovations have been refined, resulting in a competent and in-depth wrestling sim from bell to bell.

Career ladder match

There are more meaningful reasons to lace up the boots this year. The biggest example is MyCareer, which ditches last year's dragged-out campaign in favour of a fully-voiced, tailor-made adventure. There's some excellent writing and voice acting, and the story remains engaging to the last, making the linear progression and occasional repetition a non-issue.

Showcase mode also returns after a two-year absence, offering the ability to play out the career (so far) of WWE legend Daniel Bryan. We've seen more fully-featured versions of this mode in the past, but what's included is stellar – objective-driven action interspersed with beautifully recreated cutscenes and video commentary from the man himself.

It's apparent that the series wants to take itself less seriously. The new Big Head mode serves as a fun, ludicrous side-attraction, and you can even concoct Minecraft-like block characters in the detailed creation suite. These types of features are sprinkled throughout WWE 2K19, as are improvements across the board, spanning everything from new and improved match types to a masterful reduction in loading times and lag in multi-person matches.

There's still plenty of work to be done, though. Bugs and glitches, while often entertaining, remain overly common, while occasional hit detection issues and a finicky default submission system detract from the fun. The audio is in desperate need of an upgrade, too, aside from the excellent work that has been applied to entrances. We've lost count of the number of times Michael Cole has exclaimed "it's surely over!" at the sight of a simple suplex.

Issues remain, then, but you get the feeling the developer has really listened to the fans, implementing meaningful upgrades for both casual and veteran audiences. There's an exhaustive amount of well-designed content to get through, while refinements to mechanics and well-received additions culminate in 2K's best WWE game to date. And that's the bottom line, 'cause GM said so. ■

"THE DEVELOPER HAS LISTENED TO THE FANS, IMPLEMENTING MEANINGFUL UPGRADES"

How does legendary WWE announcer Jim Ross like his coffee? Stone Cold! Stone Cold! Stone Cold!

GM LOVES...

- The redesigned MyCareer is a big improvement over last year.
- Lag and loading times have been dramatically reduced.

GM HATES...

- Poor crowds and commentary often hinder the immersion.
- Bugs and glitches are still ever-present across all modes.

Better than...



WWE 2K18
This year's game improves on WWE 2K18 to a large degree, particularly in the case of its redesigned and newly voiced MyCareer mode.

Worse than...



WWE SmackDown! Vs. Raw 2006
WWE 2K19 eclipses this game in most ways. But SmackDown! Vs. Raw 2006 had GM mode, and we *really* miss it.

NEED TO KNOW



The main character ('Buzz') in the new MyCareer mode is voiced by former WWE Tough Enough contestant AJ Kirsch. The 35-year-old finished joint fourth in the 2011 telly reality show.

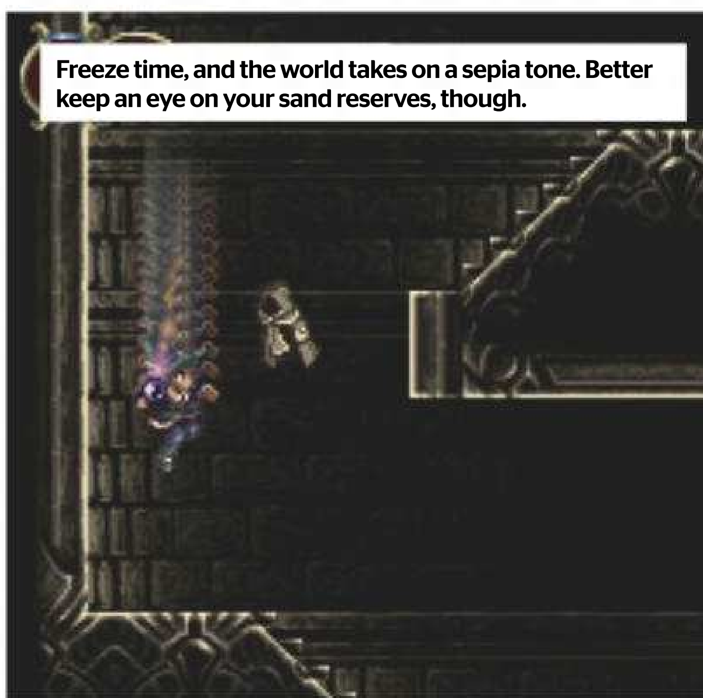
GM JUDGEMENT

82%



Key improvements across the board result in a significant upgrade over last year's entry.
Fraser Gilbert





Freeze time, and the world takes on a sepia tone. Better keep an eye on your sand reserves, though.





Format PS4 (reviewed), PC, PS Vita **Publisher** Chucklefish **Developer** Lunar Ray Games **ETA** Out now **Players** 1-2

TIMESPINNER

That new game you're looking for? Well, listen to this!

Considering this game involves time travel shenanigans (in terms of both plot and gameplay) it's appropriate that it looks like it was made in 1994. An action platformer in the Metroidvania style, with retro pics for your pixel fix. About time.

You play as Lunais, a young woman chosen to travel through time in order to save her village from the Lachiem Empire. This is achieved via the unoriginally named, but highly effective, Timespinner. Somewhat inevitably, Something Goes Wrong, and she's forced to salvage events as best she can.

This being a videogame, the extremely complex and multifaceted situation Lunais finds herself in is largely solved by killing things. To that end, although there's only one standard attack button, she carries two orbs to attack with. There are a variety of different orbs to find throughout the game and, as with all of the collectibles, you'll need to pull your exploring trousers up to Simon Cowell height to find them all. Each orb differs in speed, strength, and reach, and is levelled up through use. You can mix and match orbs as you wish, and swap them out whenever you like.

There's stat-affecting equipment, a more powerful attack dependent on an aura meter (again, with more choices to be found), and, after a while, the ability to have an AI familiar (who can, alternatively, be controlled by a second player). What is – or, at least, *should be* – the main hook, however, is the time manipulation. The story dictates time travel at certain points, and changing maps often means flitting between the past and the present. But there's a more meaningful integration of this idea too.

Make time

You can freeze time whenever you like with a single button tap (so long as you have some magical sand in your pixelated pockets). While time is stopped, you are invincible, and can hop on and over enemies without fear of damage. It's useful for escaping or avoiding combat when your resources are low, but also for making your own platforms to reach otherwise inaccessible areas.

Moments where time tinkering is compulsory for progress are few and far between, making it easy to forget it's even an option. Timespinner has a more general problem with player progression, in that once you've hit a milestone (such as defeating a boss), it's often not at all clear where you should go next. With no waypoints, some subtle signposting would've been welcome.

Nonetheless, Timespinner has so much to give. It's crammed full of secrets, and the way the final few hours are handled is *very* clever. There are multiple endings, you see, and a whole dungeon (with associated boss fights) that many players will surely be forever unaware of, believing they've 'finished' the game. The more we play, the more we realise there's always something to come back for.

The first available endings can be seen in five or six hours, one of two 'true' endings in seven or eight, and there's New Game+ (and a higher difficulty) for completionists. The time travel idea feels underused, and the side-quests – though welcome – too mundane. Still, this stands tall in the crowd of retro-styled games, and is worthy of your time. ■

> "THE MORE WE PLAY, THE MORE WE REALISE THERE'S ALWAYS SOMETHING TO COME BACK FOR"

Told you so. I can travel back in time. Don't believe me? I'll show you.

GM LOVES...

- The number of secrets to dig out is impressive.
- The final leg of the adventure is clever and compelling.

GM HATES...

- Occasional lack of direction means too much wandering.
- 'Kill/collect X number of Y' side quests? *sigh*

Better than...



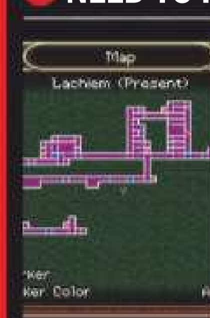
A Hat In Time
Despite featuring a magical hat *and* a boss fight against a toilet, this 3D platformer doesn't match up to Timespinner. Quite charming, though.

Worse than...



Braid
Jonathan Blow's last-gen classic, similarly retro platformer makes much better use of the time travel idea, with many more puzzles.

NEED TO KNOW



Maps are completed through exploration. Blue shows fast travel points, red is save rooms. With no way to zoom in, using the map to locate routes to new rooms will require a fair bit of squinting.

GM JUDGEMENT

81%



With quality platforming, you should definitely give this time-twisting adventure a spin.
Luke Kemp

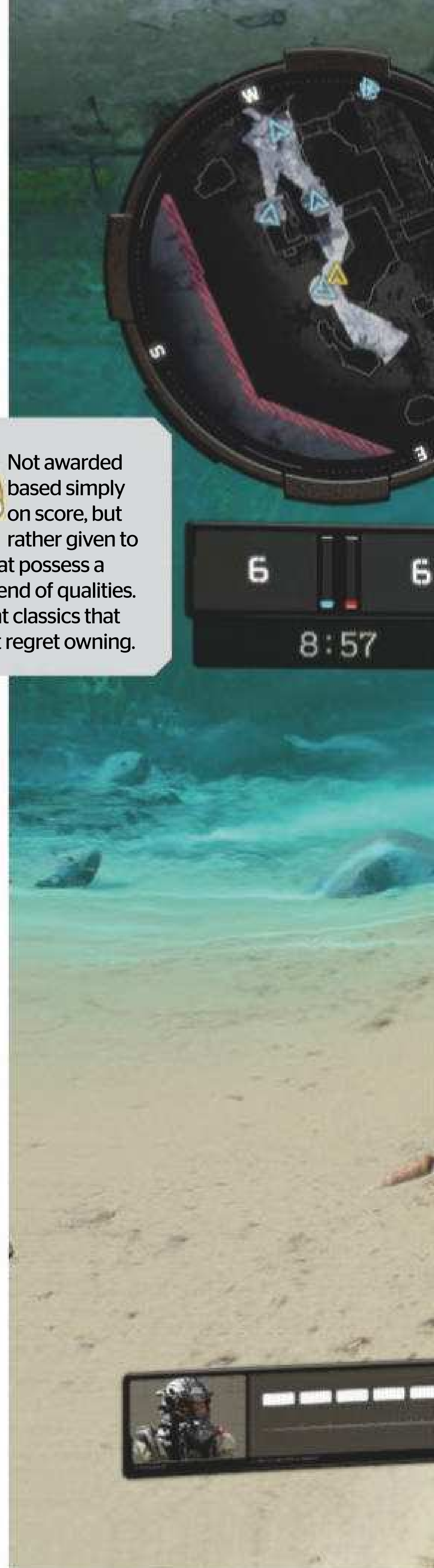
HOW WE SCORE

0-39 Awful Avoid it as you would a bullet with your name on.
40-59 Poor Major issues here that won't be solved with a hug.
60-69 Decent A mixed bag filled with sweets and sharp stones.
70-79 Good Some flaws, but still a very enjoyable experience.
80-89 Excellent Buy it, love it, thank us when you're done.
90-100 Outstanding A rare and essential piece of brilliance.

The small print: We rate games in comparison to what else is available on the same system, in the same genre, and for the same format at the time of release. So this year's FIFA might score less than a FIFA from three years ago, but still be a better game. Because time, and our expectations, move on. Hey, you're smart, you get it...



Not awarded based simply on score, but rather given to games that possess a special blend of qualities. For instant classics that you won't regret owning.



Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Treyarch **ETA** Out now **Players** 1-100

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS 4

Single-player mode is gun but not forgotten as the long-lived series soldiers on



ou can't feed today's hunger with yesterday's meal, and Call Of Duty: Black Ops 4 knows this all too well. For the first time in the series' history, there is no traditional single-player campaign to the games. It's strange to boot it up and not see a story mode waiting for you on the menu screen. Even more strangely, after all the fuss that was made about the game releasing without the usual single-player mode, its omission feels like a safe choice. Welcome to our post-single-player world. It does not feature a ludicrously lifelike digital version of Kit Harington.

In recent years the campaign moved from the main event to the undercard, something fans blasted through out of habit before committing themselves to regular sessions of multiplayer or zombies. These two modes alone wouldn't have filled the void, but together with Black Ops 4's brand-new mode, Blackout, they do.

Blackout is Treyarch's take on the battle royale genre. It's 88 players (or 100 in the four-player quads mode) skydiving into one massive map and fighting to the death. Technologically it's a marvel, as slick and stable as one of the series' signature campaign corridor shootouts but spread across several kilometres of woodland, desert, coast, and urban terrain. Treyarch has turned an engine built for speed into one capable of endurance. Albeit, with caveats.

It's incredibly ugly at times, with some interiors consisting of nothing more than a rug, a lamp, and a blurry table. Punches were pulled to get the mode running. That's not to say it isn't a success. Think of this as PUBG with the rough edges sanded down. Inventory management is incredibly simple, all done by a few clicks of the D-pad. It means you spend less time faffing and more time fighting. Vehicles across land, sea, and air, meanwhile, are so easy to drive that trying to mangle someone with your chopper blades is almost a no-brainer.

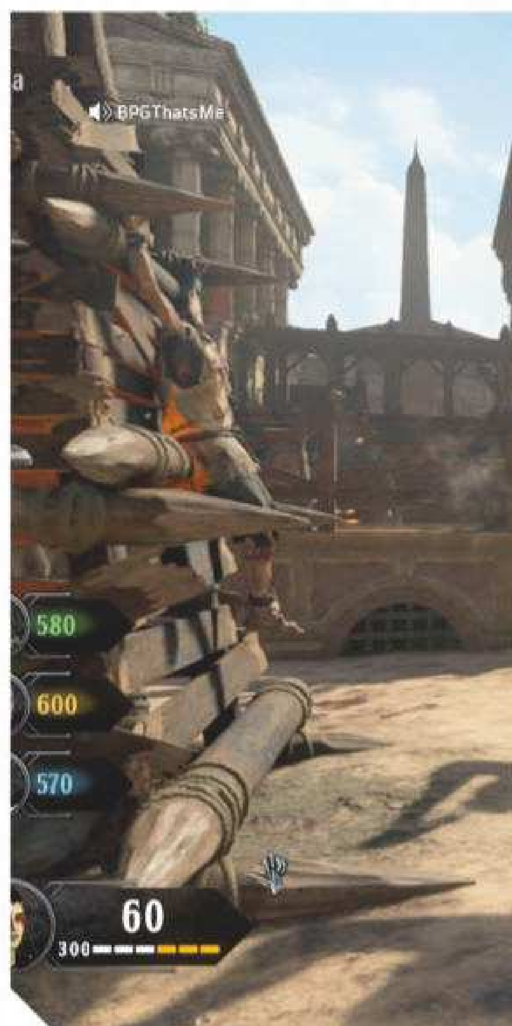


Quad goals

For better and worse, Blackout is the fastest battle royale out there. It feels completely at odds with the game's multiplayer portion that rewards hyper aggression, and players who don't adapt will likely grow frustrated at being repeatedly sent back to the lobby. One wrong turn and you're dead. Call Of Duty is usually about charging into the next duel, whereas this is more about avoiding them altogether. Blackout doesn't at first seem a natural fit.

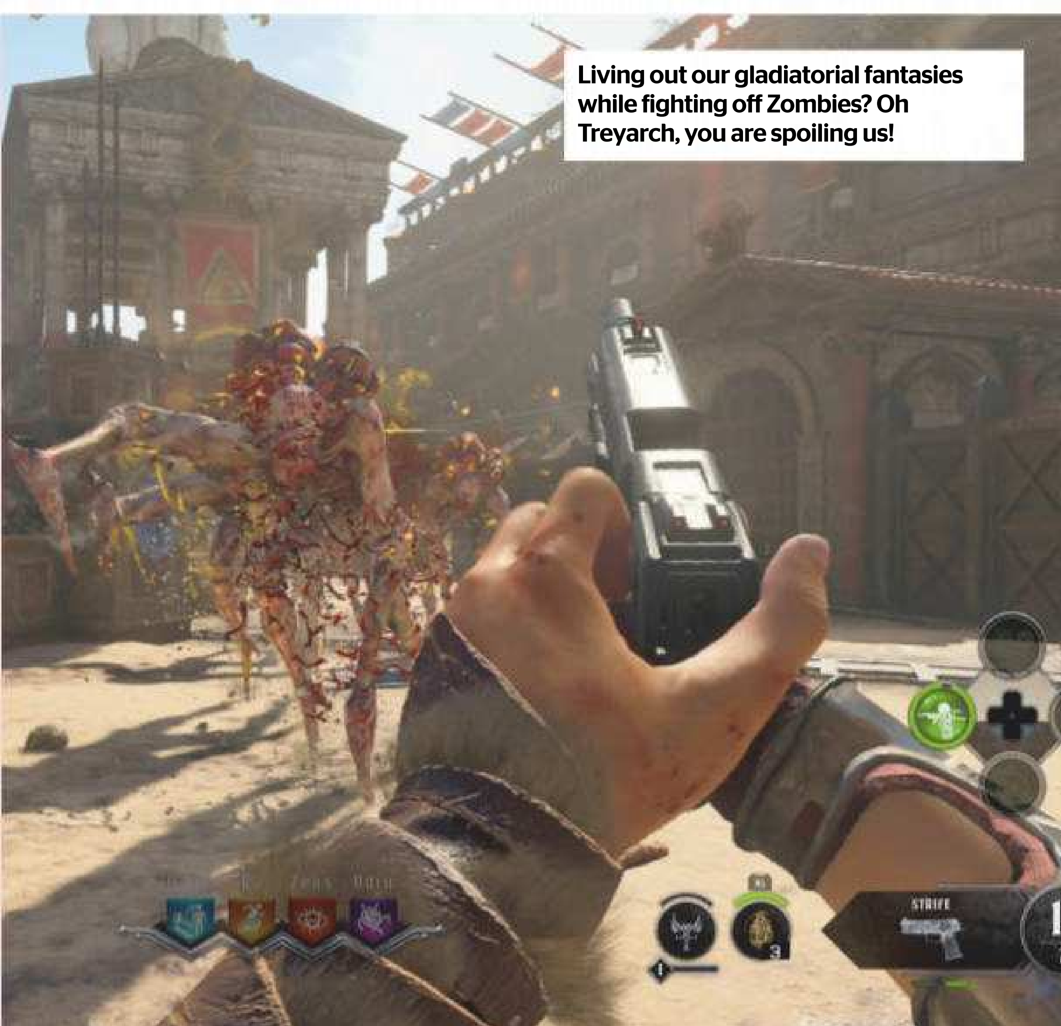
Still, you've got plenty of time to acclimatise, because this is a mode Treyarch clearly intends to support indefinitely. Take the character missions, in which you have to find a series of items in order to unlock that character. This gives you something to do other than killing. Other touches, like the presence of zombies, offer an extra dimension. Try baiting them over to opponents for a good time. There are optional tasks too. In a boxing ring we defeat a brief wave of zombies before unlocking a chest containing a meaty lock-on rocket launcher. In a crowded

> "WITH BLACKOUT, TREYARCH TURNS AN ENGINE BUILT FOR SPEED INTO ONE CAPABLE OF ENDURANCE"



Who is secretly the best Specialist? The one inside you all along.

Colombia's lovely at this time of year, especially for watery shootouts. Can we get bulletproof trunks?


Living out our gladiatorial fantasies while fighting off Zombies? Oh Treyarch, you are spoiling us!



SOLDIER OF MISFORTUNE

What everything on your screen means

Squeamish players can turn off dismemberment and restore arms and legs to their indestructible former selves.

The minimap has improved. Vision cones shared by the entire team let you see what they see. It teaches you to watch all corners.

This is the Specialist HUD. For Firebreak, L1+R1 whips out a flamethrower, and holding R1 summons a radioactive canister that poisons enemies.

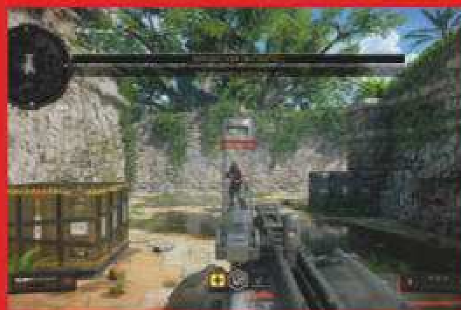
Max health bumps to 150. This slightly increases the average length of life (good), although constantly having to heal is annoying (bad).

FIRST-PERSON TUTOR

Each of the ten specialists has a short tutorial to familiarise you with their play style, bookended by impressive cinematics telling a story. These missions are split in three...



The cinematic shows your Specialist being a badass, and ties into a wider story set between Black Ops 2 and 3.



In the onboarding mission you'll use your Specialist's talents to murder a bunch of AI dummies that exist purely to die.



At the end you'll cement your bot-killing legacy in an offline competitive match. You can replay it for a better star ranking.

genre these novel additions give Blackout an edge.

It's quick, stable, and addictive. You drop, you fight, you die, you go again. While it's tough to stomach getting instantly sent back to the lobby after a tense 20 minutes, given the raw pace this is played at, you can get a new game going in seconds. It's less remarkable than its more innovative peers, true, but it really does give you everything you'd want in a battle royale game.

Future-proof

Onto multiplayer now, and happily this is on its best form for years. A purer COD, out go wall-running, double jumping, and any other remnant of futuristic military tech that turned you into an annoying jumpy flea soldier, and in comes lean, grounded action. Gunplay, not movement, reigns supreme here, placing the emphasis on tactics and accuracy. Central to which are Specialists. These ten classes each have a distinct ability and piece of equipment. Tank-man Ajax brings a '9-bang' flash grenade that can be cooked to detonate multiple times, and a ballistic shield with built-in pistol, while Recon is more intel-based, firing a sensor dart to reveal enemies and using vision pulse to highlight them through walls. There were fears Black Ops 4 would become a hero shooter in the Overwatch vein, but this isn't the case.

> "GUNPLAY, NOT MOVEMENT, REIGNS SUPREME IN MULTIPLAYER, PLACING THE EMPHASIS ON ACCURACY"

Abilities and equipment rarely dominate, instead giving you the tools to help you play the game the way you want, whether zealously, defensively, or supportively. Add to that cooldown meters limiting your party tricks to roughly one use per life, and a reduction in player count from 12 to ten in standard team deathmatch, and you've always got a clearer picture of what Specialist powers are in play without everything turning into a big magical mess.

Multiplayer is less a meat grinder, more one of those machines that churns out artisan pasta. That's in part due to bigger health bars that soak up more damage, preventing death coming quite so thick and fast. You can have more gunfights now. It's not just about who shoots first, but whether they can use their accuracy to *keep* shooting. New manual healing is the dark side of these larger health bars. You'd think having to press LB/L1 to top your health up would incentivise vigilance, but given the sheer speed of matches, you'll do this dozens of times. Hitting the heal button is a chore, like clocking in for work or brushing your teeth, an unnecessary distraction that detracts from the otherwise focussed nature of the game.

In all this, Treyarch finds time to introduce two new game modes. Heist sees your five-person team steal a bag of cash then fight to reach an extraction point, using cash to buy more equipment after each round, while Control is fixed-point land-grabbing with a shared pool of lives. They're attempts to scratch



INFO BURST!

Four of the ten Specialists, and just how special they are

Battery

Working in the field of explosions, Battery's ability is a bouncing grenade launcher called War Machine. Her equipment is a looping cluster grenade that spits out more grenades. It's designed to flush enemies from cover, blow them up, and then blow them up again. Bonus feel-good points if you manage to stick someone with it.

Firebreak

Area denial is Firebreak's stock-in-trade. He's got a flamethrower as his ability, and this scorches enemies at close range – making it perfect for burning bunched-up foes. His equipment is a reactor core that emits a damaging radiation field wounding enemies within its radius, even if they're on a balcony or behind a wall.

Nomad

Nomad is an ambush kinda guy, partnering with a battle-scarred pit bull terrier that you can command to follow or set to patrol a designated location. When you hear barks, the most dangerous player has entered the game. A laser tripwire is his equipment: place it on either side of entrances to create no-go areas.

Ruin

The tip of the spear during team rushes, Ruin's grav slam delivers a lethal blast from the skies. Getting up into those skies is a breeze thanks to his grapple gun equipment, which latches onto a point in the environment and slingshots him across quickly. Go ahead and make the ultimate sacrifice, you weird Tarzan soldier.





an itch that wasn't actually itchy in the first place, but they'll give you something to do between sessions of Team Deathmatch or Kill Confirmed. Heist, in particular, is interesting in the way players gradually start spawning with ever more powerful weapons.

Topographic violence

Map-wise, there's a healthy 14 at launch. Highlights include the Colombia-coast-set Contraband, if only for its underwater shootouts and prancing blue crabs, and Militia, set in a mercenary compound with definite Far Cry 5 vibes. It's a little disappointing that they stick to the same mid-sized symmetrical template, however. We know the game is capable of huge seamless play areas thanks to Blackout, and despite the bold primary colours and tightly designed avenues on new maps like Morocco, and freshened-up favourites like Summit, there's not a lot of experimentation here.

The wave-based Zombies mode, on the other hand, returns revitalised courtesy of the Chaos storyline, a time-travelling escapade taking four new characters to two new stages. The Roman colosseum of IX features zombie gladiators, armoured tigers, and a central killing floor that absolutely crawls with enemies in later rounds, while Voyage Of Despair's Titanic is overrun with multiple floors of Edwardian undead. The combination of confined passageways and wide open spaces has you see-sawing between feelings of horror and release – strafing round IX's bloody colosseum or the Titanic's grand central staircase with a bullet-spraying submachine gun is pure joy.

That said, Zombies is a little impenetrable for newcomers, even with tutorials. It isn't purely about surviving waves. There are hidden quests, obscure Easter eggs, and systems stacked on top of systems, including perks, talismans, and customisable elixir power-ups. Although you've got the option of playing with bots, they won't help you with any objectives. With three sprawling maps in total, Zombies will keep you busy, but it's also the least accessible part of the Black Ops 4 package.

As a whole, this is Call Of Duty's most forward-thinking entry in years, packing only the essentials for its long march forward. As the saying goes, you get to where you're going by walking away from where you've been, and with the triple threat of multiplayer, Zombies, and Blackout, this is a game taking the bold step of losing something that no longer serves it in order to make room for something that does. ■

GM LOVES...

- Blackout mode distinguishes itself from the competition.
- Specialists make multiplayer that little bit more strategic.

GM HATES...

- Having to heal yourself every ten seconds in multiplayer gets dull.
- It's hard to adjust to Blackout's more sedate pace.

Better than...



PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds
While less satisfying, Blackout is more stable, its inventories are simpler, and there's the hook of character missions.

Worse than...



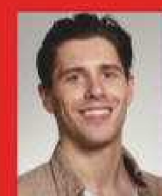
Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
In a toss-up between having a meaty single-player mode or Blackout, we'll take the former every time.

NEED TO KNOW

Black Ops 4 launches with three Zombies maps: Voyage Of Despair, Blood Of The Dead, and IX. For the fourth, Classified, you'll need a Black Ops Pass or a special edition of the game. You can't buy it.

GM JUDGEMENT

85%



Forget what's not there; deeper Zombies, focussed multiplayer, and COD's great Blackout bet pays off.
Benjamin Griffin

When life gives you a lot of enemies, you're going to need a lot of rubber balls to throw at them.






Format Switch, PS4 (reviewed), XO, PC **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

MEGA MAN 11

The blast from the past steps up a Gear



While the likes of Link, Solid Snake, and fellow platforming pal Mario have completely changed tack to better fall in line with the expectations of gaming audiences over the decades, Mega Man has remained staunchly close to his '80s roots. The Blue Bomber's long-awaited 11th outing dishes up an experience that's much the same as the series has been providing for the last 30 years, but with a refined recipe – including a few new ingredients – that's been cooked to platforming perfection.

The most apparent of those new additions is the game's overhauled visual style. Gone are the flat and outdated 2D graphics, replaced with a modern styling that's seriously snazzy. The visual overhaul, a blend of beautifully hand-drawn environments and detailed 3D character models, refreshes the ageing series' art style with an eye-popping aesthetic that gives the game the charming look and feel of a Saturday morning children's cartoon.

Power up

The new additions are far more than skin-deep, however. The Double Gear system is a particularly innovative introduction, offering two benefits: Speed Gear gives you the ability to slow down time; and Power Gear adds more oomph to your attacks. You deploy these using the shoulder buttons, and can instantly activate and deactivate them whenever you please. While either is active, the gear gauge gets filled – if it overheats you'll be without both until the gauge resets, meaning you have to be clever about when you choose to use the system and pay close attention when it's active, which isn't always easy when you're fighting off a flurry of enemy attacks or trying to outrun a deadly wall of spikes.

The Double Gear system not only rejuvenates the series' long-established formula, it changes the very nature of enemies and environments, introducing a new level of challenge. The increased arsenal that comes with Power Gear means that enemies come thick and fast, but Speed Gear is the real game changer. The ability to slow down time allows for more punishing platforming as you navigate moving platforms suspended over spiked chasms or employ it to gain a few precious seconds to mow down enemies as you flee from approaching fire. The additions make for some of the biggest challenges the series has ever seen, its demanding nature sure to delight seasoned players.

For the uninitiated, Mega Man can be something of a baptism of fire, with

bygone ideas like limited lives making mistimed jumps and careless combat techniques a costly affair. Unlike modern games, Mega Man has no qualms about confronting you with the Game Over screen and forcing you to start a level from scratch. Even on Normal difficulty, the game is brutal, giving you only three lives and enemies that don't go down easily. Casual mode is a tad more forgiving, while the highest difficulty, Superhero, is only for those with godlike reflexes. Fortunately, Capcom has also considered newbies, whose fingers might not be nimble enough to overcome the game's gruelling levels, with the introduction of Newcomer mode. Granting you unlimited lives, you're also mercifully saved from instant death should you mistime a jump, and can soak up considerably more damage from enemies. It's a welcome addition that means players of all skill levels can see the credits, and offers a training ground for those wanting to learn the layout of levels before taking on the tougher challenge of higher difficulties without the annoyance of repetition.

Otherwise, Mega Man 11 is pretty standard fare for the series, rigidly sticking to the established formula. To thwart Dr Wily's evil plans, Mega Man must don his blue armour and fight his way through eight stages, each of which culminates in a showdown with that area's evil robot overlord. The levels are engaging and well designed, each having its own distinct appearance, enemies, and obstacles. By far the most enjoyable is Bounce Man's world; a nauseatingly cutesy level filled with bouncy balls that Mega Man can use to fling himself around bubblegum-coloured environments teeming with deadly balloons. Tundra Man's level is also a highlight, offering a joy-filled jaunt across a snow-laden wonderland where you'll have to make your way through deadly blizzards and keep your cool as you navigate icy platforms.

"SPEED GEAR GIVES YOU THE ABILITY TO SLOW DOWN TIME; AND POWER GEAR ADDS OOMPH TO ATTACKS"

Robot wars

While they offer a considerable challenge, the boss battles aren't overly thrilling, with the exception of Block Man who, midway through the fight, suddenly transforms into a huge hulking rock giant with a completely new set of moves. We eagerly anticipated the same happening with the rest of Wily's robotic posse, but it never happened. Each boss bestows you a with new type of attack when they fall, though these vary greatly in their effectiveness. Best Block Man, for example, and you'll get the ability to summon blocks that fall from the sky onto the enemies' heads, useful for dealing with opponents at range, while Acid Man's Acid Barrier allows you to absorb damage. Conversely, moves like Chain Blast see you unleash a string of sticky bombs that require clever timing to be really effective. Using any of these attacks while in Power Gear sees Mega Man perform a much more devastating version that can clear the screen in seconds. Having a wealth of attack options to choose from and an arsenal that's constantly bolstered as the game goes on, as well as a plethora of different enemy types, keeps excitement high throughout.

Mega Man 11 is a fitting instalment for players who were disappointed by 2016's 'spiritual successor' Mighty No. 9 and longed for a current-gen Mega Man adventure that would do the game's history justice. This latest instalment offers a true taste of the traditional, while the added gameplay enhancements, accessibility, and visuals provide enough modern extras to be welcoming to players who've missed out on the first ten games. (No, you don't need to have played all the others to enjoy this one.) If you've always wondered what all the fuss is about, this should be just the title to initiate you into one of platforming's most iconic series. ■

What boss would Anne-Marie add to Mega Man's roster? Pun Man – a non-violent robot who slays his opponents with the power of witty wordplay.

TOOLS OF DESTRUCTION

Ways to bash your foes

Victory in a boss battle doesn't just offer bragging rights, it also gives you access to a brand-new weapon. Once unlocked, these can be switched on the fly using the shoulder buttons and Mega Man's armour changes depending on what weapon he's currently got equipped.



1 Scramble Thunder lets you unleash balls of electricity that cling to solid surfaces to give enemies a shock.



2 You wouldn't think throwing rubber balls at an enemy would be entirely effective, but Bounce Ball is devastating.



3 Make enemies hot under the collar with Blazing Torch, which launches a fireball diagonally into the air.



4 Pile Driver is a fetching orange and yellow ensemble that lets you charge forward and spike enemies.



5 With Acid Barrier, Mega Man can encase himself in a ball of acid that protects him from enemy attacks. Nice!



THE END'S NOT NIGH

Challenge your skills

Mega Man 11 isn't overly lengthy, but when you're done battling the good doctor's mechanical minions there are lots of extra challenges on offer.

While modes like Time Attack and Score Attack are pretty standard fare, there are also more creative challenges to contend with. Jump Saver, for example, tasks you with completing a level in as few jumps as possible, and popping blue balloons is the aim in Balloon Rush.

GM LOVES...

- **The updated visuals make for an eye-poppingly gorgeous game.**
- **The special weapons are distinctive and fun to use.**

GM HATES...

- **Some of the platforming sections are rage-quit-inducing.**
- **Levels are linear and offer little in the way of replay value.**

Better than...



Mighty No. 9

This crowdfunded platformer might look like a Mega Man game, and its heart was in the right place, but it's a pale intimation of the real thing.

Worse than...



Hollow Knight

This beautiful 2D Metroidvania offers a bigger and richer world that's packed full of secrets to discover and hazards to overcome. It really is a bug's life.

NEED TO KNOW



With Mega Man 10 released back in 2010, we've had a substantial wait for the next numbered entry. The departure of producer Keiji Inafune is said to be the main reason for the series' hiatus.

GM JUDGEMENT

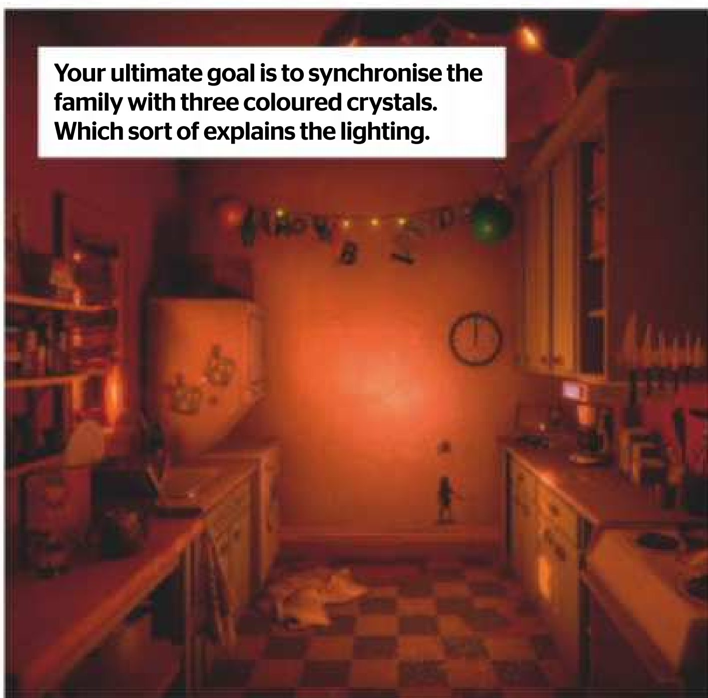
84%



A charming and challenging retro robo romp that'll delight long-time fans and newcomers alike.

Anne-Marie Coyle





Your ultimate goal is to synchronise the family with three coloured crystals. Which sort of explains the lighting.







Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** SpectreVision **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

TRANSFERENCE

Simulation slickness enhances a VR mind-melter

Imagine What Remains of Edith Finch, PT and Layers of Fear met in an escape room, and you've got a pretty good mental image of this horror-tinged thriller. Developed by Elijah Wood's SpectreVision, it combines filmed footage and puzzle-led exploration in a short but atmospheric adventure that suggests Frodo has a bright future in games.

In filmic parlance, it's a three-hander – but the central trio aren't actually present. At least not in body: you're inside their minds, part of a simulation that lets users inhabit other consciousnesses. It's a bit like a first-person Animus, except you're not controlling anyone of historical significance, but an American family: a scientist dad (played by Blue Ruin star Macon Blair), a musician mum, and a kid who swears when he can't find his dog.

That's just one sign of domestic disharmony, but there are plenty of others, as the three characters' very different views of their cramped, messy home start to bleed into one another, and video and audio logs show the family being pulled apart by dad's dangerous ambitions. The place is probably a bit too messy, in truth, the game overdosing slightly on environmental storytelling. There's plenty of stuff to pick up and examine, but not all of it tells you much.

Patch my glitch up

It also slackens the story's pace, especially during the moments when bugs in the simulation require you to find a specific item – though at least it gives you a clue as to what you're after, even if you don't know where to find it. And while the game is happy to lock doors to subtly guide you to your next objective, it occasionally holds you up by not making it clear enough where you're going wrong. We brute-forced one puzzle, though the actual solution didn't seem to make an awful lot of sense.

Meanwhile, the narrative is a puzzle in its own right, fragmented as it is between the three characters and their strikingly differentiated versions of the family home. It's intriguing enough to make you want to fill in the gaps, but this is the kind of game in which you're torn between probing further and not really wanting to.

That's because the atmosphere is thick with menace, with all sorts of strange crackles, whispers, and loud, insistent banging putting you on edge. It's clearly been designed primarily for VR, and that's how you should play it if you possibly can: the sense of a malevolent presence in the house is all the more palpable, and you're made to feel exposed and vulnerable. You'll never get your hands on a weapon, and even when you're in no immediate danger, the game works hard to make sure you never feel entirely safe.

Almost inevitably, it gets less unsettling as it goes on, abandoning the air of slowly creeping dread that percolates through the early stages. But if Transference eventually ends up in noisy, slightly hokey territory as it dials the shadows, saturation and sound up to 11-and-a-half, it reaches a shrieking pitch that is gripping in its own way. One or two moments we played through are threatening to be rattling around in our brains a while longer: this may be a short game, but its spell looks set to linger well beyond its duration. ■

> "IT'S A GAME IN WHICH YOU'RE TORN BETWEEN PROBING FURTHER AND NOT REALLY WANTING TO"

Why wouldn't putting up 'lost dog' posters help the family? Dogs can't read!

GM LOVES...

- A shiver-inducing, tense, and claustrophobic atmosphere.
- Macon Blair is great as the deranged scientist.

GM HATES...

- One or two puzzles are a little too obscure to work well.
- Doesn't quite have the same impact without a VR headset.

Better than...



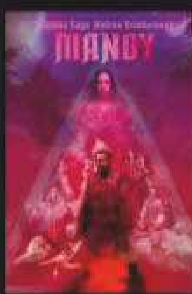
Here They Lie
Launched alongside PS VR, this weird horror exploration game will have you reaching for the sick bag, but not for the reasons the devs intended.

Worse than...



Resident Evil 7
Its VR implementation isn't without its flaws, but Capcom's bold survival-horror reinvention keeps the scares going for longer.

NEED TO KNOW



Transference is SpectreVision's first game, its other work all being films with thriller or horror leanings. They include Panos Cosmatos' spectacular revenge thriller Mandy.

GM JUDGEMENT

79%



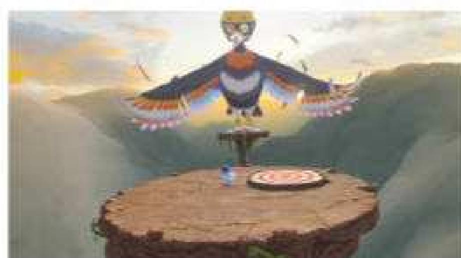
A clever, creepy refashioning of familiar ideas that will make your head spin – in a good way
Chris Schilling



We've heard of tilting at windmills, but nutting them? You'll need to use your head in more ways than one...







Format PS VR **Publisher** Sony **Developer** Asobi Team, Japan Studio **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

ASTRO BOT: RESCUE MISSION

Could this tiny hero be PS VR's saviour?

If you were somehow able to ignore Astro Bot's VR elements, you'd be left with a robust but unspectacular platformer. But setting aside the ways Asobi Team's game uses the technology is all but impossible: this simply couldn't and wouldn't exist without it. It's been built not to be augmented by VR, but to use it to its fullest, and the benefits are enormous. Sometimes literally so: Rescue Mission works minor miracles with scale, with levels that inspire genuine wonder, from vistas that stretch into the distance to gargantuan bosses that tower unnervingly over you. It might use familiar ingredients, but it makes them feel new and vibrant again.

It all begins with a skirmish in space. A nasty alien tears apart a ship full of little robots, scattering the pieces – and the crew – across five planets. There's just one survivor: a plucky bot with a blue helmet and cape called Astro. With the player cast as a larger bot, guiding Astro with a PS4 controller that appears in the game and moves according to your own motions, it's up to this unlikely pairing to complete the titular quest.

Aye, robot

The actual running and jumping is reasonably straightforward, but it's elevated hugely by the presentation. These worlds surround you entirely. You hover just above the ground, looking down on Astro from a fairly traditional third-person camera, except your head is now the right analogue stick. When you enter a new level, you'll want to pause just to drink it all in before you set off.

As much as exploration inevitably involves guiding Astro to the right places, you'll do a lot of the work with your eyes: every now and again you'll want to leave the controller idle and just look around, seeking out cracks in walls, listening out for plaintive cries from Astro's lost chums. And then... aha! Look over the edge of a platform and you'll see one hiding below, next to a conveniently-placed bounce pad that allows Astro to get back to you. His crewmates have no such issue hovering over to you once Astro's kickstarted them, tucking themselves inside your on-screen DualShock's flip-top touchpad. (If only the real thing had such a feature, eh?)

You'll get to play with a variety of gadgets: a hook lets you pull rocky obstacles to pieces, or even tear a gorilla's teeth out in the first world's boss fight, and a hose lets you inflate an octopus to bursting point, or raise the water level of a stage, while throwing stars need to be lobbed vertically and horizontally to sever threads and hit buttons that lie behind bars. It keeps finding different uses for each of them, and even when it revisits similar level themes, it's always with a twist. There's a brilliant early underwater stage, but the game goes one better in the next world, as you're swallowed by a whale. As the stage ends, Astro and the level goal are blasted out through its blowhole, leaving you all balancing on the spray. Delightful.

If enemies are more annoying than challenging, and the game's later stages pull the odd cheap trick, Astro Bot's few flaws are not enough to break its spell. It's not just one of the best PS VR titles since launch, but almost certainly the year's finest 3D platformer. ■

"WHEN YOU ENTER A NEW LEVEL, YOU'LL WANT TO PAUSE JUST TO DRINK IT ALL IN"

Why are there PS Vitas in space, but no Nintendo 3DS? Because in space, no-one can hear dual screen.

GM LOVES...

- Levels look glorious: crisp, clean, beautifully lit and expansive.
- Gadgets enliven the simple but enjoyable platforming.
- Asobi Team finds the formula for fun underwater stages.

GM HATES...

- Fire-themed stages aren't as enjoyable as the rest.

Better than...



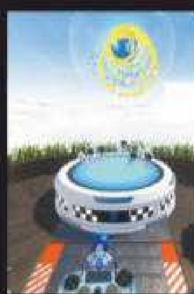
Lucky's Tale
An average 3D platformer that never really makes the most of virtual reality, this isn't fit to lick Astro Bot's boots. Unlucky, really.

Worse than...



Super Mario Odyssey
Either this or Super Mario Galaxy 2 marks the pinnacle of 3D platforming, though Astro Bot isn't as far behind Ninty's finest as you'd think.

NEED TO KNOW



There are 25 challenge stages besides the campaign, unlocked by locating hidden chameleons. Beat them and you'll get gold and silver robots to join the rest of the rescued bots.

GM JUDGEMENT

90%



Both a meticulously crafted adventure and a fabulous PS VR showcase – one of 2018's nicest surprises.
Chris Schilling

One minigame has three players working together to control a mecha crab, because... well, why not?

Format Switch **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nd Cube **ETA** Out now **Players** 4

SUPER MARIO PARTY

Still partying like it's 1998

What does the word 'party' mean to you? Fizzy pop, bouncy castles, and tails pinned on donkeys? Heavy basslines, inept dancing, and a lot of morning-after regret? Or perhaps a cheeseboard, a bottle of something nice, and conversations on the latest bit of prestige telly? In the Mushroom Kingdom, parties are none of these things – instead, they're a sacred and time-honoured way of settling arguments. So, a *family* party.

In the case of Super Mario Party, the argument is about who is the greatest superstar in all the land. It could be Mario, Peach, or Yoshi; but equally it could be Bowser or one of his cronies. The only way to resolve this conflict, between figures who might at any other time be locked in mortal combat, is through a sort of giant board game, where characters move according to the whims of the dice and play quick minigames between rounds. You know, a party.

This has been Mario and pals' preferred format of shindig for two decades now, with ten entries in the main series and five handheld spin-offs. Super Mario Party isn't here to smash any preconceptions, but it does promise a bigger hootenanny than ever before. There are just north of 80 minigames on offer here, and they can be accessed in a variety of ways.

There's the traditional board game mode, but also a Partner Party team variant, borrowed from the Star Rush 3DS instalment. Or you can opt to play just co-op minigames, presented as a white-water rafting adventure in River Survival, or test your rhythm with Sound Stage's music-themed selections. Then there's the single-player Challenge Road mode, and Toad's Rec Room, a collection of slightly more fleshed-out games which can be played across two Switches.

"WON'T SMASH PRECONCEPTIONS, BUT IT DOES PROMISE A BIGGER HOOTENANNY THAN EVER BEFORE"

All of this is grounded in a hub world where you can interact with familiar characters that developer Nd Cube couldn't quite squeeze in anywhere else. It's an impressively big package, although perhaps deceptively so – ultimately, these are just different ways of squeezing a bit of extra life out of those 80 minigames.

Size doesn't matter

Fortunately, that selection of minigames is pretty solid. They vary in complexity, from classic Mario Party push-and-shove platforming to a three-card-monte-style game of shuffling Russian dolls. There's a basic two-button football match in there, but also a round that challenges you to get the boiled sweets out of jar more quickly than your opponents.

Many of the minigames utilise the Joy-Cons' motion controls, for example to flip a steak in a pan or rotate two tetromino-like blocks until they line up, and in some cases their 'HD Rumble' haptics, which is basically always a case of identifying the strongest rumble.

None are going to have you clamouring to spend hours exploring their depths, and some offerings are certainly stronger than others, but there's a nice range on offer. Their simplicity and brevity – each game lasts around a

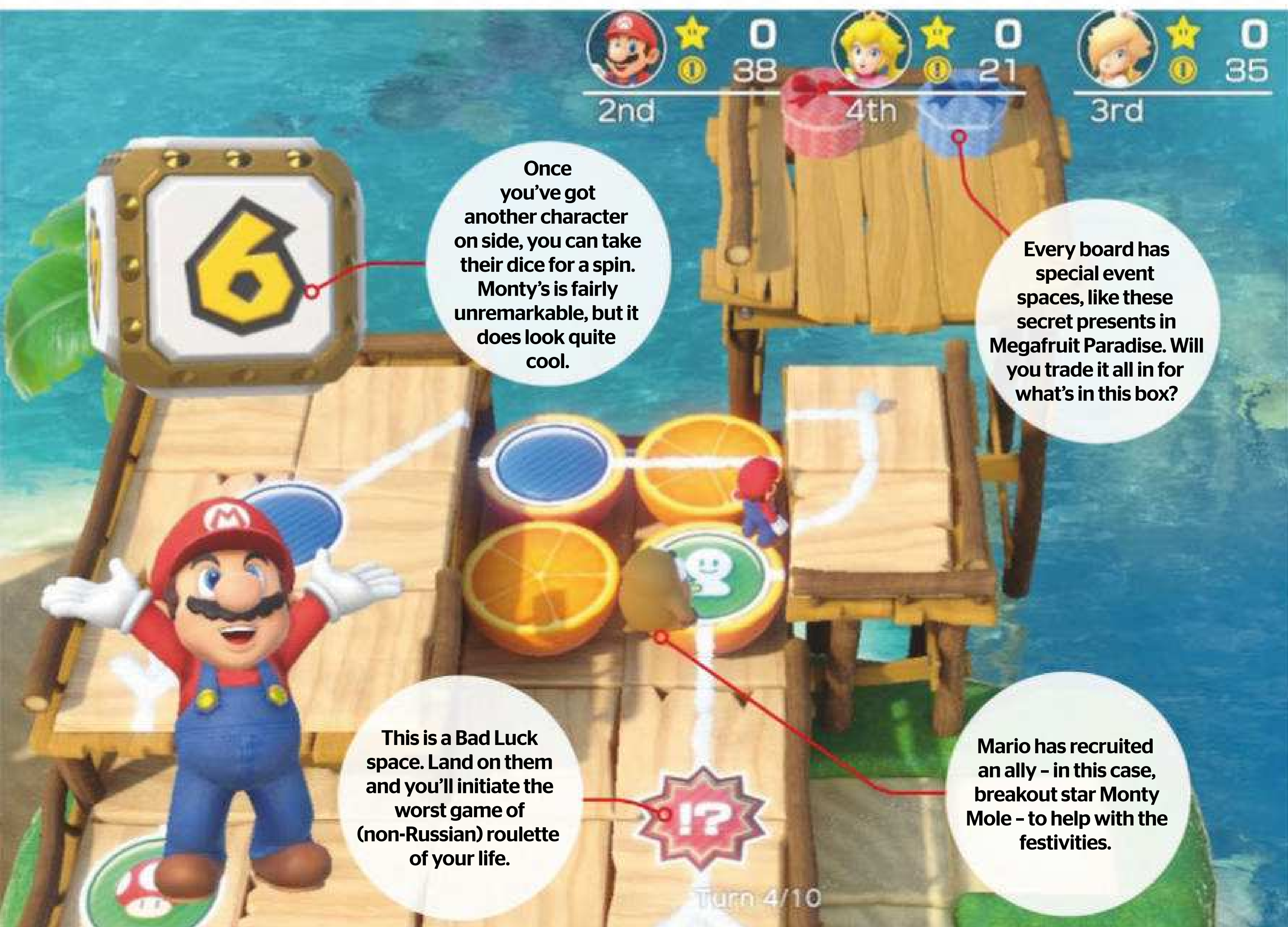


LIFE'S SWITCH TAPESTRY

Two screens become one

One of Super Mario Party's headline features is the introduction of minigames that utilise two Switches at once. There are just four of these in total, off in their own corner of the hub.

Banana, Split is the only game that actually requires two to play – it shows halves of bananas on each screen and challenges you to line them up by moving the Switches around. But the highlight is Shell Shocked, a fairly straightforward top-down tank battle game where the way screens are arranged on the table dictates the shape of the map. There's a genuine magic to shuffling in-game space around as you move each Switch.




Each victory feels genuinely significant, with celebrations specific to the game and character.


Every minigame has a punny title. This is called 'Slaparazzi'. We assume the localisation team knocked off early that day.

Which competitor earned the nickname 'Public Swimming Pool Pervert' during a particularly heated session? Waluigi. Sorry, The Internet. He's gross.

minute – is actually a strength. With most games limited to a single button and the analogue stick, or a shake of the Joy-Con, just about anyone should be able to pick up a controller and play.

Drop a Switch on a table at an actual, non-Mario party – it actually works surprisingly well on the small screen, even in the games that split it four ways – and people can cycle in and out, playing a couple of games before handing off to whoever's been watching quizzically over their shoulder.

We tested this in the field (a busy pub on a Saturday night) and found that, even after we walked away from the console, the basic rules of play were passed organically between a dozen friends, some of them unused to videogames, before interest eventually petered out. In this kind of environment, the game can truly live up to its title.

Dicey business

In this case, the minigames were served as a sort of finger buffet, with players free to grab whatever they liked from the 80-strong menu. This isn't the game's own serving suggestion, however. It puts the board game mode front and centre, so much so that it's actually called 'Mario Party'. This mode treats the minigames more as canapés, tiny appetisers brought out at regular intervals, between sessions of the board game. And presented this way, these morsels of game can seem flimsy and lightweight.

This mode continues to be the game's weak point. Nd Cube has tried to add complexity to the board game, with a few additions to the formula. Each character now comes with a customised dice block they can choose to roll instead of the usual D6, reflecting their character in some way – so reliable old Daisy has a die made up entirely of mediocre 3s and 4s, while the hulking Donkey Kong either rolls a 10 or 0.

This is coupled with Allies, one of many ideas borrowed from Star Rush. Characters not currently in play will linger on the board, ready to join whoever lands on their square. Once they're recruited, you can choose to roll their custom dice block, and they'll also roll a smaller die, adding one or two to the total.

The boards themselves are more sophisticated than ever before too, loaded with fun gimmicks from warp pipes to exploding Bob-ombs, and branching paths to choose from. But all these choices don't change the fact that it's a game of pure luck.

Random chance can produce great stories: the player in last place managing to pick up two of the game-winning stars in a single turn, pushing them into the lead… then immediately landing on a Bad Luck space and forfeiting one to the new loser. With friends, that can be a source of laughter, but it can also be infuriating. While the game's presentation might be kid-friendly, the language you'll use when a bad roll loses you an hour-long game certainly won't be.

Worst of all, this structure makes the minigames feel inconsequential. Winning yields coins, which can be exchanged for stars, but so does landing on the right space. Played this way, Super Mario Party feels like it's ashamed of its minigames. But it shouldn't be.

For experienced players and Mario Party newbies alike, these 60-second nuggets of game provide plenty of bouncing, inept dancing and a fair amount of cheesy thrills. In short, they bring the party. Just don't be tempted to break open the board games, or it'll be a long night. ■

GM LOVES…

- A robust set of minigames, with the odd glimmer of brilliance.
- Simple controls that make the games accessible to all.

GM HATES…

- Those awful dice. Please, no more dice rolls. Ever.
- There are a lot of modes, but they're not all created equal.

Better than…



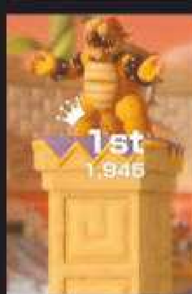
Mario Party: Star Rush
Super Mario Party borrows a lot of its 3DS predecessor's excellent ideas, but manages to build and improve on them all to deliver even more fun.

Worse than…



Nintendo Land
Minigames? Check. Motion controls? Check. Hub world? Check. But this underrated Wii U gem remains the high watermark of Ninty party games.

ONLINE



Super Mario Party is the first game in the series to offer online multiplayer, but it's limited to a shallow 'Mario-thon' mode stringing together five minigames into a quick tournament.

GM JUDGEMENT

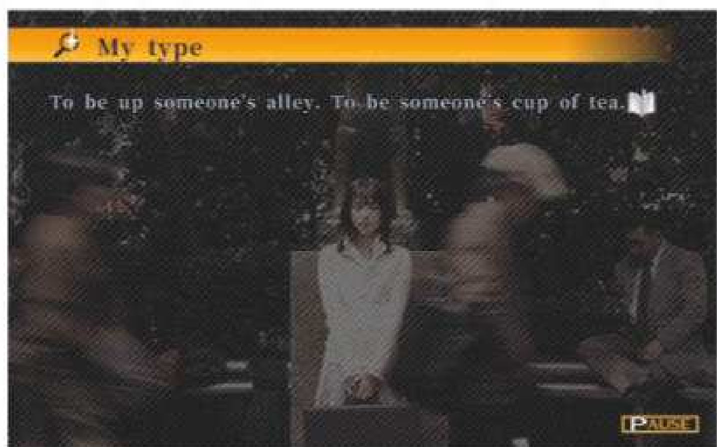
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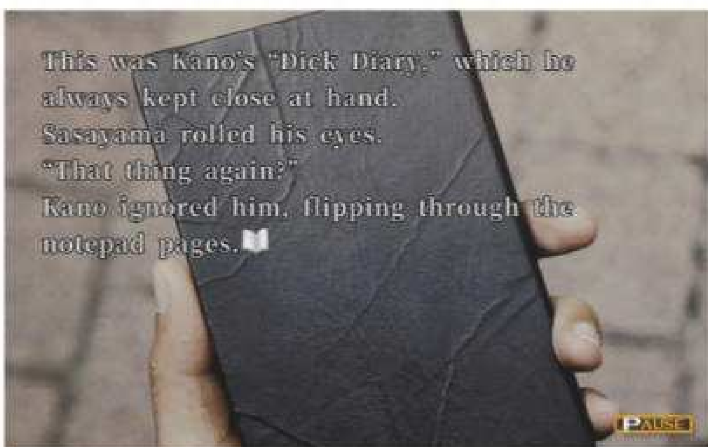


The additions and breadth of ways to play earn that 'Super' prefix, but the games are still the star.
Alex Spencer




We'd love to gush about our favourite characters and story turns but we can't bear to spoil it for you.





Format PS4, PC **Publisher** Koch Media, Spike Chunsoft **Developer** Abstraction Games **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

428: SHIBUYA SCRAMBLE

No need to read between the lines of this visual novel

This remaster of a decade-old, cult classic visual novel never before released in English may be a hard sell for some. Like most titles in the genre, Scramble is text-heavy, but if you stick with it through its plodding default text speed, you'll find these eggs are far from an omelette gone awry.

In broad strokes, the story follows multiple characters over the course of one hectic day in Shibuya. Knotting these disparate threads is a kidnapping you'll need to get to the bottom of by navigating a number of story decisions. But in Shibuya, no man is an island and your decisions have a far-reaching ripple effect. For example, a wrong move early on from grime fighter Achi Endo can lead to the end of gumshoe Shinya Kano's career... so, you know, no pressure.

The branching path ahead of you is littered with Bad Ends but, rather than a typical Game Over, these are par for the course. Featuring more than 80 possible endings, frustration seldom follows the worst of these. For one, this is because a helpful hint often follows, not-so-subtly advising another course of action. You'll frequently hop between characters' stories, adjusting their actions for a more favourable chain of events to occur elsewhere in the story. For two, wrong turns are seldom frustrating because of the writing – more often than not, you'll actually want to seek out those Bad Ends.

Criss-cross, applesauce

Featuring a cast of fools and eccentrics, the ways in which characters' stories criss-cross into one another is a delight to watch unfold. From the rising detective who never heads to a crime scene without his Dick Diary (which is not as saucy as the name would suggest; mind *out* of the gutter), to the brash Tama sewn into her mascot suit, it's difficult not to be endeared to these lovable idiots.

Despite the dark mystery centring on everyone in Shibuya, there's a comedic tone throughout. Beginning with an absolute belter of an opening theme tune, the overall presentation is energetic and possesses a surprising amount of verve for a story told through mostly static images of live action actors. Through savvy (but certainly not in any way restrained or subtle) direction and the odd bit of playful experimentation, the most is made of what could otherwise have been a fairly limited visual style. This slick presentation alongside memorable characters will appeal to VN veterans and newcomers alike, though the latter group benefits from a concise tutorial. While a more accessible title to VN newbies because of this, it's not necessarily an easy ride.

The plot ramps up its stakes beyond that initial attaché case containing a ransom of 50 million yen, the tone taking quite a turn around the mid-way mark, becoming pleasingly ludicrous as a result, though still treated with sincerity. While you're gently eased into the story and thread-hopping gameplay, you'll have your work cut out for you if you're gunning for the very best ending... and that includes setting up some very particular, not-always-flagged-up things in the story long before the final showdown. But regardless of which ending you, uh, end up with, it's worth crossing the Shibuya Scramble of choices and heading down this twisty trail. ■

> "THE WAYS IN WHICH CHARACTERS' STORIES CRISS-CROSS INTO ONE ANOTHER IS A DELIGHT TO WATCH"

Between Good Ends and Bad Ends, what will you dedicate your life to playing VNs like I have? Fri-ends.

GM LOVES...

- The screwball characters are endlessly endearing.
- Despite using static images, the presentation is engaging.
- An accessible entry point for new visual novel readers.

GM HATES...

- Unsubtle Twin Peaks references will wear down even super-fans.

Better than...



Utawarerumono: Mask Of Deception
In Scramble, you're given more agency and the presentation is less uneven than this book-with-fighty-bits.

Worse than...



Root Letter
Scramble's initially goofy tone may wear on your patience. If you're looking for something more serious, this will scratch that itch.

NEED TO KNOW



Jiro Ishii of Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors fame directed and wrote many of the fiendish twists here. There's also a sequel anime, but to talk too much about that would be a bit of a spoiler...

GM JUDGEMENT

88%



A wild ride from start to finish, with memorable characters and an absorbing plot.
Jess Kinghorn



Cards are a welcome addition, enabling you to bolster your team. You can also convert cards into Action Points.

Space Hulk is as much a game of tactically locking and unlocking doors as it is of full-frontal carnage. A bit like owning cats, then.

The Heavy Weapon Bearer's culinary trick in the Space Marine canteen is chargrilling three Genestealers simultaneously.

Environmental obstacles like Orkish spores and explosive barrels can be used to slow down or, well, explode your enemies.

Format PS4, XO, PC **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive **Developer** Cyanide Studio **ETA** Out now **Players** 1 (online multiplayer)

SPACE HULK: TACTICS

This Hulk is less than smashing

What did Robert say whenever he fetched the cafetiere while playing? In the Emperor's Name, I shall requisition this Chalice Of Primordial Energy

The Space Hulk board game came out in 1989, halfway between the second and third Alien movies. And the venerable Warhammer 40k board game really feels like a splice-child of the two. It's a game of claustrophobic spaces, of tactically opening and closing doors to crowd-control the alien threat, and of heavy firepower clashing with vicious predatory instinct - and this latest videogame iteration sticks to the rule book.

Space Hulk is a tactical game designed around confinement, with attacks played out by dice rolls. Each map is a grim grid of single-tile corridors and 3x3 square rooms, brimming with obstacles like gun turrets, explosive barrels, and teleports. The Space Hulk is a world-sized Katamari ball of ruined spaceships, on course to crash into a planet, its formidable husk now home to Genestealers, a savage alien species eager to make planetfall. It's up to a five-man squad of Space Marine Terminators to prevent them doing so.

This is every bit a digital version of the board game, capturing the suspenseful, stomping feel of guiding Terminators down decrepit corridors while aliens swarm in from the dark. The Terminators pack a small arsenal of heavy weapons, from boltguns to flamethrowers, and the hook in this version is that you can play cards to temporarily aid your squad, or convert into precious action points.

Over-overwatching

The cards add depth to a game that can feel flat; maps quickly repeat themselves, and there's little mission variety or dramatic ebb-and-flow to the campaign. It's a heavy-footed trudge through moody but homogeneous confines. The limited mechanics feel better suited to short snappy sessions with friends (good thing there's multiplayer, eh?).

As the Marines, you march single-file down corridors, you manoeuvre Terminators out of each other's way, you create criss-crossing overwatch lines, and you *might* saw a Genestealer in half. Only the Librarian, with his magic barricades and whirlwind attacks, escapes this rigid gridded structure. The Genestealers lack the upgrades and ranginess of the Terminators, but offer a new way to play. You distribute them as 'blips', containing none to three Genestealers, across spawn points on the map. The number of creatures per blip is only revealed to Terminators once there's line of sight, and the presentation of Genestealers crawling out of ducts upon being uncovered sets the tone nicely. You can use empty blips as decoys while swarming in from another side, and can reproduce to formidable levels. The mix of lurking/flanking tactics is a nice contrast to the Terminators' ponderous play style (though the down side is you'll spend a good minute watching the AI Terminators plod out their turn).

Space Hulk was never designed for long-term engagement. It's a relatively accessible, fast-paced game that builds suspense over short- to mid-length sessions. In that sense, Space Hulk: Tactics succeeds as a digital recreation of the board game. But it fails where it tries to embrace the digital medium, exposed by a humdrum campaign and limited animations. Like the Terminator, it treats its mission to the IP efficiently, with little desire for the spectacular. ■

> **"GUIDE TERMINATORS DOWN DECREPIT CORRIDORS WHILE ALIENS SWARM IN FROM THE DARK"**

GM LOVES...

- ✔ The premise, like everything 40K, is gloriously gritty.
- ✔ Accessible rules make this good for quick multiplayer sessions.

GM HATES...

- ✘ The first-person view looks great but is a tactical nightmare.
- ✘ Lack of environmental variety makes the campaign fizzle.

Better than...



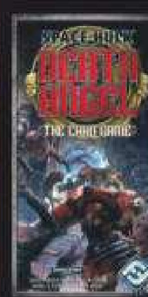
Space Hulk (2013)
Better in that Tactics is much the same game but five years later, with just about enough extra sheen to be considered an improvement.

Worse than...



Phantom Doctrine
A tactical spy thriller that's been improved by plenty of patches, with a campaign that's engaging between missions rather than just during them.

NEED TO KNOW



If you want an interesting twist on the Space Hulk formula, try the card game Space Hulk: Death Angel. It's a co-op game (though you can play it by yourself), and arguably the most suspenseful variation on the IP to date.

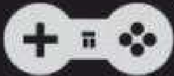
GM JUDGEMENT

67%



A faithful board game adaptation that lacks the depth to grab you in its power fist and not let go.
Robert Zak

GM Review
The Final Verdict!

NOW PLAYING

This month's biggest time sinks on Team GM



1 ASSASSINS CREED ODYSSEY
PS4, XO, PC
Exploration mode brings a big change to AC. Instead of setting off in a straight line toward my target, I'm actually using the roads as more than ambush points.
Ian Evenden, Editor



2 FORZA HORIZON 4
XO, PC
Thrashing an Audi around the Lake District in autumn turns out to be a lot of fun, especially when the game's easygoing enough to reward you for just about anything. Whoever built all those dry stone walls: I'm very sorry.
Ian Evenden, Editor



3 ASSETTO CORSA COMPETIZIONE
PC
This is in Early Access, and the potential is here, though it's not Assetto Corsa yet. With force feedback working on my Fanatec wheel it will be sweeter.
Rob Crossland, Art Editor



4 BLOOD BOWL 2
PC
I played the board game when I was a youngster, and I wasn't disappointed coming back to it. There is something satisfying about smashing an orc's head in with an overhead kick.
Rob Crossland, Art Editor



OFFICE LUNCHTIME GAME OF THE MONTH: CATASTRONAUTS
PS4
Rob's shouting, Ian's running, and Mim's spinning in circles: everything's going up in flames... and the same is true in this hectic co-op spaceship sim.


As Sean, you're not just making choices for yourself, you're setting an example for your kid brother. Responsibility's heavy...

Format PS4, XO, PC **Pub** Square Enix **Dev** Dontnod Entertainment **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

LIFE IS STRANGE 2 EPISODE 1

O brothers, where art thou?



After bringing Max and Chloe's story to a conclusion, Dontnod introduces two new protagonists to its acclaimed franchise. Part two is not about great power and responsibility, but explores what could happen to two boys who have lost everything.

A lot in the first few minutes of Life is Strange 2 is familiar. A teen uses 2000s pop to soundtrack his life, and the banter sounds like it was written by someone who should spend more time around actual teenagers, but there is genuine warmth. As you control Sean Diaz, a picture of a likeable guy with a tight-knit family emerges. Of course the table turns: one moment, Sean's problem is where to get some booze for a party, the next he's on the run from police, along with his nine-year-old brother Daniel.

Where LIS explored queerness in America, its sequel takes on otherness, another extremely timely subject. Sean and Daniel are the children of a Mexican immigrant, and once on their own many people are unkind to them simply due to prejudice. When they try to beg for food, a man tells his wife "I thought we moved [from California] to Oregon to get away from this". "Because of kids like you we're gonna build a wall," says another.

Bro your own way

Empathy is rare, but Sean and Daniel have each other. As Sean, you need to take care of your little brother, and a new prompt lets you interact with him to point things out or to warn him away. Unfortunately, (or fortunately?), while some of the decisions you have to make, for example whether to steal or spend money, seem important in the moment, a lot of it either leads to the same result or will have consequences beyond the first episode. Instead of doubling down on the tension, LIS 2 takes time to endear its characters to us. This approach fits the overall theme. Unlike Max, Sean and Diaz don't want to fix things, they just want to get away, and it makes you want to see where life leads them next. ■

Malindy Hetfeld

81%


You'll worry every time Daniel goes out of your sight – that's brothers for you.



"This is fine." Sometimes you need to weigh up whether that fire really needs to be put out, or if that's just the 'fire room' now.

Format Switch, PS4, XO, PC **Pub** Inertia Game Studios **Dev** Inertia Game Studios **ETA** Out now **Players** 1-4

CATASTRONAUTS

Trek yourself before you spacewreck yourself

Well, it might be true that in space no-one can hear you scream, but the same cannot be said when you're on board the USS Couch, which is where Catastronauts' up-to-four-player co-op is best played. "Space" isn't the only S-word that'll be passing your lips. But it's the one we can print.

Like a mad cross between Overcooked and FTL, your crew has to take on enemy ships across 30 levels, all while efficiently piloting your own spacecraft. Each level has you manning different craft, and unfortunately most of them seem to have been designed by unevolved alien bacteria. You'll be manning ships that have two halves only connected by a single teleporter; switching off self-destructs that need to be deactivated with button presses in tandem; and ones with no fire extinguishers where you can only put blazes out using airlocks.

Rogue squadron

Each stage manages to ramp up the chaos of trying to keep your ship functioning while also firing increasingly complex guns. New twists are added with enough variation, and the combinations of plates you need to keep spinning always feels fresh. While each task you'll be hammered with during the battles is extremely simple, rarely harder to carry out than pressing a button or using a toolbox near something that nears fixing, working as a team while everything is – quite literally – on fire is something else. Complexity in a grand task, with simple execution, feels like the perfect mix for a co-op game like this.

Even when you're doing well, the pressure is on, and it feels like you the tide could turn with one misplaced fuel canister bursting into flames, or an unseen mine teleported onto the ship exploding before it can be jettisoned.



Your priority list is ever-changing. Better activate the shields in time to stop that missile doing major damage.

What results is a co-op game that doesn't feel like it gets old, and always requires solid communication (we find a lot of really loud shouting does the trick) to get a handle on each new ship configuration. A word of warning to solo loose cannons, though: this game is one clearly designed for co-op. While a single player can control two characters at once in a serviceable fashion, it's not the fabulous black hole of chaos co-op Catastronauts brings to the couch co-op space (pun absolutely intended).

■ *Oscar Taylor-Kent*

82%

HOT DOWNLOADS

The latest DLC and expansions explored



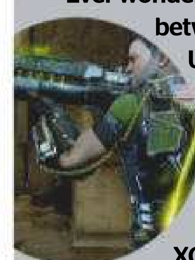
We love the pulp heroes in **Strange Brigade.** The newest is Hachiro Shimuzu, who you can get in the **Japanese Naval Officer Character Expansion Pack.** Later this month you can also welcome Anjali Khan to the Brigade in the **Maharani Huntress Character Expansion Pack.** But that's not all: if you want more thrills for your Brigadiers, three-part campaign **The Thrice Damned** should deliver the goods. Part one, Isle Of The Dead, and part two, The Sunken Kingdom, are out now, so get on board and prepare to conquer part three, Pyramid Of Bes, again later in November. Spiffing, eh?



3D anime arena fighter **My Hero One's Justice** has only just launched but you can already get your mitts on a brand-new fighter. Endeavor was available as a bonus to everyone who pre-ordered the game, but if you were tardy you can now purchase him outright.



Overcooked 2 is serving up its first DLC, a tasty dish of **Surf 'n' Turf.** Frankly we're not sure how we survived the Unbread horde without kebabs, but the tropical island-themed expansion's giving us the chance to make them, and smoothies too, though that's a bit healthy for us. It's also reintroducing old Elvis-haired chef Boof, and three new chefs. Parrot chef is definitely the best, *do not argue*. And while the swimming pools are a serious hazard, you're going to *love* cleaning dishes with a giant water pistol.



Ever wondered what happened between XCOM: Enemy Unknown and XCOM 2? **XCOM 2: War Of The Chosen – Tactical Legacy Pack** should clear that up for you, and if you've already got XCOM 2: War Of The Chosen you can get it for free till 3 December. (Do it. Do it now.) Two new game modes, including a Skirmish mode that allows you to create custom missions, 28 new maps, new weapons and armour, and a host of other goodies should keep you XCOM-ing back for more for quite some time.

Everyone who's joined **Cultist Simulator's** band of devotees will welcome its first DLC. Called **The Dancer,** you'll be able to pursue fame as the titular hoofer at occult cabaret The Ecdysis Club, and discover two new ascensions. The expansion even includes animal spirit-forms as some dances 'cannot be performed in human shape'. To which all we can say is, they've never seen Team GM on the dancefloor. Guess you'll just have to make do with this expansion instead.





THIS MONTH IN...
REMASTERINGS & REKINDLINGS

Find a glimmer in the darkness, sit, and rest a while. Take a moment to recharge, not just your health and flask, but mentally too. All endings are sad, that's their nature, but endings often lead to new beginnings and new achievements. Go ahead. Step into the unknown. You're going to do great things there. Maybe even play Dark Souls Remastered, out on Switch by the time you read this.



The game's modern re-release featured a genuinely horrible softening filter and light bloom effects which, fortunately, could be switched off.



THE CHAOS ENGINE

NODE ACTIVATED, EXIT OPEN

Thumping techno; blasting hand-cannons; working with your sibling, friend, parent, guardian, enemy, grandma; chanting along with the voiceover man as he proclaims 'EXIT OPEN'; dying repeatedly because it's way too difficult – The Chaos Engine has gone down in history as an impactful game for many a reason. All of them are shared experiences, while at the same time they're all deeply personal – the Amiga game is a legend for far too many reasons to count.

The origin

Someone at The Bitmap Brothers had played Gauntlet when they were younger and liked it quite a lot. Enough, in fact, that they decided to make a game using modern hardware that harkened back to the arcade classic – full of teamwork and betrayal, endless waves of monsters, mazes, and food.

Time passed and the details changed – it was cut from three to two players, taking it a couple of steps back from Gauntlet's four – but the theme was very much the same: The Chaos Engine was a Gauntlet tribute, and people of a certain age in 1993 loved it for that. The rest of us? We were drawn in by the unique art style, the gorgeous graphics, the pounding, intense music, the incredible voice samples, and by the fact these *old people* were raving on about it being a spiritual successor to some ancient arcade game none of us had ever played.

But that's doing The Chaos Engine a bit of a disservice. Yes it quite obviously and openly derives its central themes from Midway's arcade classic, but it was its own thing, made with its own ideas and formed of its own generation. Gauntlet provided the spark, but The Bitmap Brothers gave it fuel, oxygen, and a nice ring of rocks to stop the metaphorical fire from spreading out of control.

The legend

It's difficult to gauge how people seeing The Chaos Engine for the first time these days would judge it from a stylistic point of view. In 1993, it was easy: this game was cool. It was edgy, it was hard, it let you and a friend (or enemy) play together to work your way through some fiendish, taxing levels – or work against each other to steal the last of the food and special powers.

Developer The Bitmap Brothers
Publisher Renegade Software
Released 1993
Format PC, Amiga CD32, SNES, Mega Drive, Amiga, Atari ST
Get it Steam, GOG, eBay, car boot sales

The Chaos Engine was also revelatory for a lot of folks back then, owing to the fact it was always a two-player game, even if you were playing alone. The AI took control of the second character and, while rudimentary by modern standards, the behaviour it exhibited was convincing enough that you never truly felt like you were playing alone. There was so much special about The Chaos Engine; it all worked so perfectly together and formed a cohesive, enjoyable whole.

Choosing two characters from six – quick but weak, balanced, or slow but strong – you were dropped into a steampunk world of mutants and horror-beasts, working your way through mazes in pursuit of nodes scattered throughout levels. On shooting them, you were met with the call of 'NODE ACTIVATED' and, frankly, nobody cared much beyond that because it was such a cool voice sample. Put simply, The Chaos Engine was brilliant, and – fortunately – was appreciated as such.

The legacy

Even though The Chaos Engine was loved in its day, sold well, and has plenty of fans scattered throughout the world even now, it was a one-shot thing. It seemed fate had conspired against the game, its developers, and the home format for the adventures of the Mercenary, Gentleman, Brigand, Thug, Preacher, and Navvie.

There was a sequel in development for some time, made with the Amiga in mind

> "The Chaos Engine was brilliant, and – fortunately – was appreciated as such in its day"



Here we have a fine example of the 'node', which will have to be 'activated'.







The character known as Preacher in Europe became Scientist in the US.

and with a lot of The Bitmap Brothers' time and resources put into it. During the three years it was being made, the Amiga died a spectacular death, the gaming public moved on to the PlayStation and Saturn (while the PC established itself in the computer gaming market), and attention moved very much away from this oft-delayed sequel.

The Chaos Engine 2 did release in 1996, and it was a bold reimagining of the original, focusing on two-player competitive play. Players had to work against each other to escape levels. It was ahead of its time in many ways, but behind its time in some very key ones: namely, the Amiga was dead, and The Bitmap Brothers had become largely irrelevant along with Commodore's lamented machine.

Nothing more was heard from the series, bar the odd inkling of a port here and there, until 2013's PC rerelease – largely just a modern version of the Amiga 1200 original with some truly awful graphical filter options and empty online lobbies. The original game went down in history as a great, but the aftermath of The Chaos Engine's release was… well, *chaotic*. ■

Studio Spotlight

We don't want to talk about Speedball 2100



1 Xenon

PC, Amiga, Atari ST, C64 – 1988

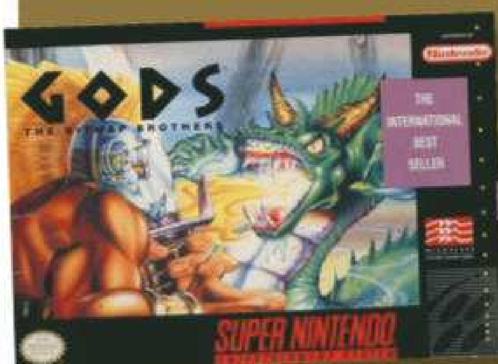
The very first game from the Bitmap Brothers wasn't its best – it's not even the best game by the Bitmaps called Xenon (the sequel, released the very next year, was far better and featured an acclaimed theme tune by Bomb The Bass). But all good things have to start somewhere, and Xenon proved to be a bar-raiser in some ways, effortlessly bringing a high-quality shooter to the Atari ST (and ported to every format under the sun) seemingly out of nowhere. It was well-received at the time, though, and from humble beginnings, a development legend began…



2 Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe

PC, Mega Drive, Game Boy, NES, Amiga, Atari ST – 1990

The best game ever made? No. But a legend to anyone who was a child in Europe in the early '90s. Speedball 2 was fast, brutal, and uncompromising – and it definitely holds up to this day. What does it matter if your opponent out-scores you, if you beat half their team to a pulp? Especially when you're awarded points for every KO? Ice cream indeed.



3 Gods

PC, SNES, Mega Drive, Amiga, Atari ST, Acorn Archimedes – 1991

An action platformer, Gods demanded a surprising amount of patience and skill from its players – qualities that most of us just couldn't provide back in the day. Backtracking, one-time-only bonuses, dynamic difficulty – it was arguably ahead of its time in many ways. But what most people actually remember Gods for is how good it looked, and of course *that* opening theme by Nation XII.



4 Z

PC, PS1, Saturn – 1996

A real-time strategy game from the era when everything had to be an RTS, Z managed to stand out from the crowd thanks to its presentation. Rather than warmongering cult leaders or… well, Warcraft, it was drunken robots clogging up the joint. The fact it involved a style of play that eschewed the common resource-grab of others in the genre made it that bit more interesting too.



5 World War II: Frontline Command

PC – 2003

The last game to be made by the Bitmaps, Frontline Command was an accomplished, though unspectacular, RTS. It was the last time we heard anything new from the once-essential studio. The Bitmaps never officially closed, the studio just hasn't made anything new for 15 years, concentrating on licensing and remakes instead.

SIX OF THE BEST...

STEAMPUNK GAMES

Just glue some gears on it and call it steampunk? Works for us...

The Chaos Engine (see the past couple of pages) got us thinking about all things steampunk. You know: Victorian (ish) setting, steam engines that power machines far in advance of what they should be able to produce in said time period, people wearing rather fantastic outfits involving goggles...

Steampunk's been pretty much a constant through the past 30 years of gaming, and it makes for a great aesthetic - it's defined enough that there are accepted ideas on thematic form and function, so it's clear to everyone what's expected and what's involved. But it's woolly enough around the edges that there's more than enough room for experimentation within its subgenres. What that means for us is, there are plenty of steampunk-styled games, and they absolutely run the gamut of genres. ■

PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE LOST FUTURE

DS - 2008

Some Layton games feature steampunk, some ignore it - but there's always at least a *feeling* of it. The Lost Future goes in hard - just look at the massive mechano-clocks.

SKIES OF ARCADIA

GameCube, Dreamcast - 2000

Sky pirates! Okay, so sky pirates are arguably a subgenre of their own, but Skies Of Arcadia makes it onto this list because... well, sky pirates are cool, airships are cool, this game is a gem, and we wish it'd get a rerelease.

FINAL FANTASY VI

SNES - 1994

The game begins with you waddling about in a powered mech suit; what more do you need? Final Fantasy VI - known as FFIII in the US - is a JRPG masterpiece and one of the absolute finest games in the steampunk subgenre.

STEEL EMPIRE

Mega Drive - 1992

Back from obscurity with a PC release, the Mega Drive original stood out from the shmup crowd of the early '90s thanks to its steampunk aesthetic. Helpfully, it was a solid, fun shooter too. The actual game bit does matter, you know?

SYBERIA

PC, Xbox, PS2 - 2002

It's always a surprise to those who've never played it, but the sedate, rather dull-looking adventure classic Syberia is actually riddled with steampunk touches. Not least of which is the robotic character who plays a leading role throughout. Myst this ain't.

THIEF: THE DARK PROJECT

PC - 1998

Released during a peak period for FPSes, Thief had no incentive to use weapons. And while everyone was going modern-day or sci-fi, it went steampunk. Oh, and was one of the best games of all time. Ah, Thief.

Grab Bag

Retro gems from every era

Awesome Boss!



Arcanum: Of Steamworks And Magick Obscura

Format PC **Developer** Troika Games **Released** 2001

An overlooked RPG gem on PC that should get mentioned in the same breath as Baldur's Gate, Fallout, and Planescape Torment. Ahead of its time, brilliantly written, and - yep! - still fun to this day, we highly recommend you hunt down a copy.

Classic Moment!



Wild Guns

Format SNES **Developer** Natsume **Released** 1994

It's cool to think you're playing a Wild West game that recreates a non-stop shootout, but going into Wild Guns with no prior knowledge can prove a surprising move. First it's the machine guns, then it's the little robots randomly running into battle - finally it's that first boss, who pops up and makes you realise... this isn't an *authentic* Wild West shootout: it's steampunk.

Remake Request!



Jeff Wayne's War Of The Worlds

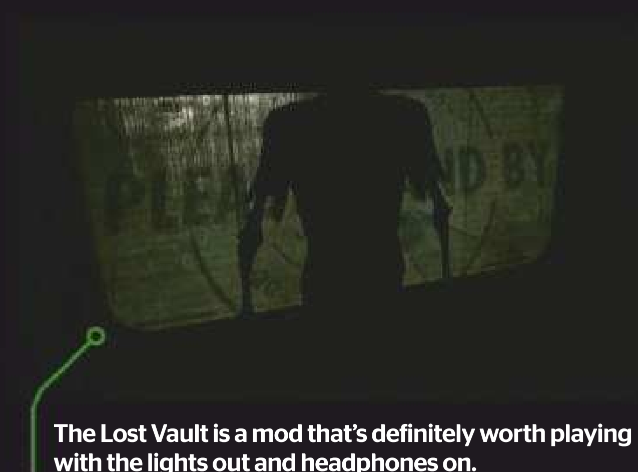
Format PC **Developer** Rage Software **Released** 1998

Okay, so really this is based on the flimsiest pretence: RTS games are popular for esports, so why not remake a forgotten RTS game from the late '90s which is literally called 'War Of The Worlds' and use it to simulate wars between nations of the world (in esports)? No? Oh. Ah well, even if that didn't work we'd still have the wonderful soundtrack.

Work on The Lost Vault began in April 2016 and was completed just over two years later.

MAKING THE CRUELLEST MODS

What does it take to create a spooky side story for Fallout 4? We catch up with modder Anthony Piraino to find out



The Lost Vault is a mod that's definitely worth playing with the lights out and headphones on.

Fallout 76 is fast approaching, and with it, Bethesda is poised to redefine its post-apocalyptic wasteland. However, thanks to a thriving modding scene, the series' fourth instalment has mutated and survived, much like we're hoping to in 76. From expanded settlements to exceptional weapons, mods can vastly extend your stay in the Wastleland after you've combed every corner of its vast open world. Among the best is The Lost Vault, created by Anthony Piraino, also known as Spiffyskytrooper.

This narrative-driven dungeon offers something distinctly different – an atmospheric, disturbing escapade through the labyrinthine halls of an abandoned vault. "When I first started the project, I actually had no intention of finishing it," recalls Piraino. "I had already begun working out details for a story, but I never really intended for the mod to become what it is today, I was just trying to teach myself Fallout 4's Creation Kit." As it turns out, this 18-year-old Canadian modder has serious skills when it comes to creating creepy environments. On approaching the entrance to Vault 117, you're greeted with a wooden sign plastered with the pleading words, 'Please, we have children', and it doesn't get any less unsettling once you go inside. The Lost Vault is a sprawling underground facility where the lighting is sparse and the ghouls plentiful. You navigate through the darkened, distinctly bleak areas of the vault using the light from your trusty Pip-Boy, fighting off hordes of mutants, while slowly uncovering snippets that form the story of the vault's unfortunate inhabitants.

Gimme (Fallout) shelter

The Lost Vault's dark storyline fits in perfectly with the Fallout universe, and is made with such attention to detail and respect for the source material that you could easily believe that it was resurrected from Bethesda's cutting room floor. "I think the primary aspect of the vault's creation was ensuring it was realistic and believable, and most importantly lore-friendly," explains Piraino. "I've always had an issue with how small many Vaults are in the Fallout universe, especially when it doesn't hint at more to explore behind locked doors and barricaded hallways. I found myself completing one section, only to be feverishly starting another. I think that's what may give it the labyrinth effect. I tried to think of everything, tried to make it as big and expansive as possible. If I'm being completely honest, I thought about making certain areas like the residential section way bigger than it ended up being!"

While wandering through Vault 117 is an undeniably unnerving experience, Piraino was careful not to rely on the kind of cheesy jump scares and clichéd plots that are so commonly called upon when creators are trying to give their audience the heebie-jeebies. "I enjoy horror when there's a little more thought behind it," says Piraino. "I enjoy dark, gritty plots, where the disturbing story is used as the horror device. I find it

"I ENJOY HORROR WHEN THERE'S A LITTLE MORE THOUGHT BEHIND IT"



Some of Piraino's favourite things are world-ending scenarios, '50s culture, and sci-fi.



Piraino's next mod, Icepick Overhaul – also for Fallout 4, is looking rather… cool



Vault 117 got its name via a community poll; it bears the same number as the cut vault from Fallout 4 that was originally located between the Jamaica Plain and Andrew Station.



to be a lot more effective at making me feel uncomfortable and uneasy."

Piraino has created mods for many games, – there are 132 releases currently sitting in his mod vault. His other most notable work is also for Fallout 4, including ReGrowth Overhaul, which transforms the wasteland into a lush, green, vegetation-filled world, and Dustbowl Overhaul, which delivers the desert vibe of Fallout: New Vegas. A personal favourite of Piraino's is his Minuteman Watchtowers mod, "I really enjoy this one since it adds locations to explore in the middle of nowhere," explains Piraino. "While I found Fallout 4's world encapsulating, I find it hard to be interested in straying from the roads to go explore the wilderness, and I think Minuteman Watchtowers helps remedy this."

Fancy making a mod of your own? Having been in the modding game for four years now, Piraino has some reassuring advice. "Just give it a shot," he says. "If you have an idea, and you're dedicated to making it a reality, download the toolkit and other required programs, and give it your all. The modding community is probably one of the best that I know, with many helpful authors and users willing to help newcomers."

Creating mods is hard and time-consuming graft, but it's also very rewarding, as Piraino explains: "I think the most enjoyable part of creating mods is seeing it all come together and work in-game, and when you release it to the community for feedback. It's always awesome to see people enjoying something that you came up with." He is currently working on new Fallout projects, and if they can deliver the same intrigue and seamless blending with the Fallout universe as The Lost Vault, our time roaming Fallout 4's Wasteland is far from over. ■ ***Anne-Marie Coyle***

SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS! SEE THIS!

Play This!

Experience the horrors of The Lost Vault for yourself on PC or Xbox One: bit.ly/gm_lostvault



GLOBAL MASTER

Keep your head warm with these gaming hats



HEAD RAP

When it comes to headgear, they don't get much more recognisable than PaRappa the Rapper's orange beanie. Despite the game being released over two decades ago, officially licensed hats are still being sold to this day, so you can channel the paper-thin dog and lay down some sick beats. Warning, rapping ability not included.

STYLE LEVEL UP



If there was an award for the coolest hat in gaming (and there should be) it would undoubtedly go to League Of Legends' Veigar. The Tiny Master Of Evil's pointy blue number offers both comfort and style. Pair with a blue cloak for maximum badassery, and be mindful of low ceilings.

HAT'S MORE LIKE IT

The complexity of animating hair on '80s console hardware resulted in videogames' most iconic hat resting on Mario's head. Made in his trademark colour, this bright bonnet also bears the famous plumber's initial.



GAMES MASTER GAME GUIDE

Our definitive list of the best games to play right now

Not sure which games to grab? Trust the experts (that's us) to shine a light of clarity through your fog of confusion. Over this spread you'll find GamesMaster's 100 per cent scientifically accurate and indisputable list of the greatest games on modern machines – updated monthly – as well as the top five most vital exclusives on each of the major platforms. Pick one of these up and, buddy, you're going to have yourself a good time.





1

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

Switch / Wii U

Nintendo casually revolutionises the open-world genre with perhaps the best launch title ever. Explore, fight, and cook your way across Hyrule.



2

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

PS4 / XO / PC / PS3 / 360

Rockstar's most detailed, immersive cityscape yet serves as the backdrop for a brilliantly explosive, multi-layered crime saga.



3

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

PS4 / XO / PC

An unbelievably vast fantasy world, where grim adventure – and brilliantly mature, engaging storytelling – lurks around every corner.



4

THE LAST OF US

PS4 / PS3

Naughty Dog's greatest triumph yet: the dark and truly cinematic tale of Joel and Ellie, two survivors in a dying world.



5

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

PS4

A perfect remake of a genuinely awe-inspiring adventure. So good we gave it our only ever 100% review score back in GM327.



6

DARK SOULS III

PS4 / XO / PC

Take on some of gaming's most unforgiving enemies in weighty, impactful battles. There are few games more satisfying to beat.

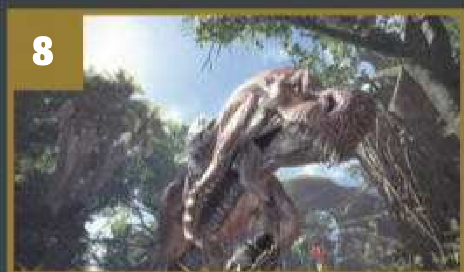


7

PERSONA 5

PS4 / PS3

The greatest JRPG on current-gen – a stylish, rebellious story of teenage fury and surreal journeys into your enemies' minds.


8

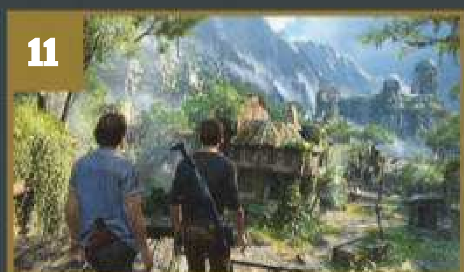
MONSTER HUNTER WORLD
PS4 / XO / PC
The once-cult series finally hit the mainstream with this stunning entry. Hunt big dinosaurs with your mates and make armour from their bits!


9

HORIZON: ZERO DAWN
PS4
A truly unique vision from the creators of Killzone. Primitive humans hunt robotic beasts across a beautiful wilderness.


10

SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY
Switch / Wii U
Switch's first Mario game is also one of the best ever, taking you on an unashamedly joyous, globe-trotting adventure.


11

UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END
PS4
An incredible end to one of the most spectacular series around, seeing Nathan Drake off in style. One of the best-looking games ever made.


12

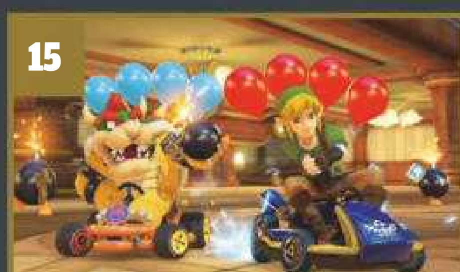
FORZA MOTORSPORT 7
XO / PC
The best entry in the series yet, and one of the greatest racing games ever made. It's absolutely gorgeous to boot.


13

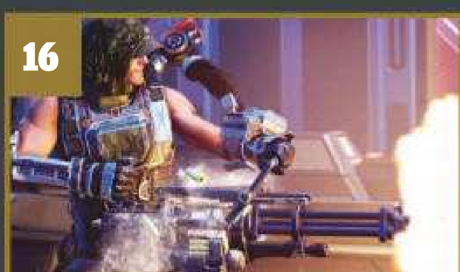
GOD OF WAR
PS4
A brilliant new take on Kratos that brings real humanity to the character, as he hacks his way through Norse mythology.


14

OVERWATCH
PS4 / XO / PC
Colourful characters and slick shooting make this multiplayer FPS from the makers of World Of Warcraft utterly irresistible.


15

MARIO KART 8
Switch / Wii U
The definitive kart racer, now portable and packed with new features on Switch. Own a Nintendo console? This is a must-have.


16

XCOM 2
PS4 / XO / PC
A turn-based strategy masterpiece that doesn't pull its punches. Try not to get too attached to your soldiers, eh?


17

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR
PS4 / XO / PC
Solid third-person action elevated by its incredible system of procedurally-generated orcs, each with their own personality.


18

TOWERFALL ASCENSION
Switch / PS4 / XO / PC / PS Vita
A true legend of local multiplayer action that still eats up our office lunchtimes to this day. The very definition of easy to learn, hard to master.


19

HELLBLADE: SENUA'S SACRIFICE
PS4 / PC
A harrowing journey into a mythological underworld serves as the perfect backdrop to an exploration of real-world mental illness.


20

METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN
PS4 / XO / PC / PS3 / 360
Hideo Kojima's last hurrah brings open-world action to the revered series.



21

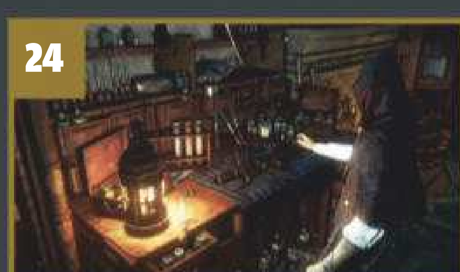
DOTA 2
PC
A strange and intimidating beast - but take the time to learn its secrets and you'll find a game of incredible tactical depth and variety.


22

HEARTHSTONE
PC / Mobile
Blizzard achieves the once-impossible - making deck-building CCGs accessible to all. Prepare to lose all your free time in 15-minute chunks.


23

MARIO + RABBIDS KINGDOMS BATTLE
Switch
Don't let its cute looks fool you - this is a tight and devilishly difficult turn-based strategy game.


24

BLOODBORNE
PS4
Dark Souls' more agile cousin, tighter and faster but no less punishing, in a world of gothic horror and Lovecraftian nightmares.


25

RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD
PS4 / XO / PC
First-person horror action that both pays fitting tribute to the series' past, and tries something totally different. Even more terrifying in VR.

THE TOP EXCLUSIVES
The five best for each console



1. FORZA MOTORSPORT 7
2. HALO 5: GUARDIANS
3. KALIMBA
4. QUANTUM BREAK
5. GEARS OF WAR 4



1. THE LAST OF US REMASTERED
2. SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS
3. HORIZON: ZERO DAWN
4. UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END
5. GOD OF WAR



1. THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD
2. SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY
3. MARIO KART 8 DELUXE
4. MARIO + RABBIDS KINGDOM BATTLE
5. ARMS



1. DOTA 2
2. TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II
3. GUILD WARS 2
4. THE SIMS 4
5. CRUSADER KINGS 2



1. POKÉMON SUN AND MOON
2. FIRE EMBLEM FATES
3. ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW LEAF
4. MONSTER HUNTER GENERATIONS
5. THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK BETWEEN WORLDS



1. HEARTHSTONE
2. DEVICE 6
3. 80 DAYS
4. SORCERY 4
5. MONUMENT VALLEY



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Issue 13, Jan 1994



Issue 42, May 1995



Issue 138, Oct 2003



Issue 147, Jun 2004



Issue 165, Nov 2005



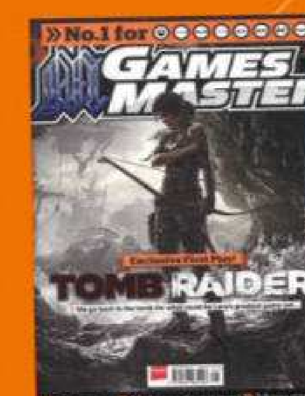
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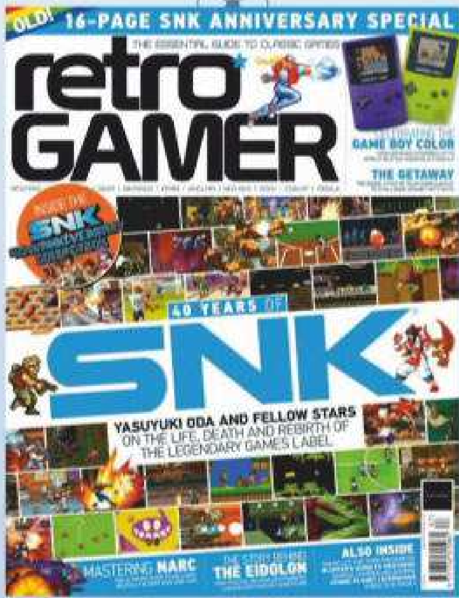


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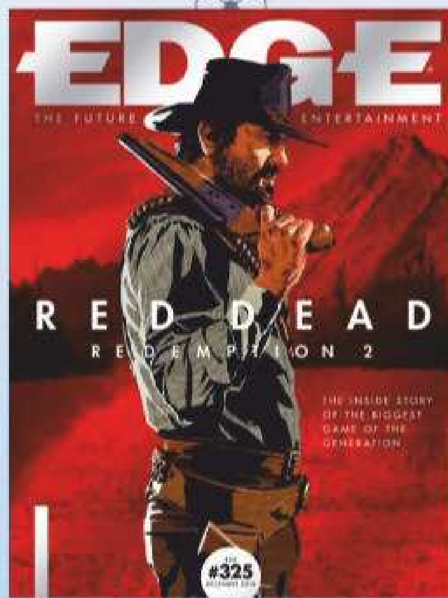


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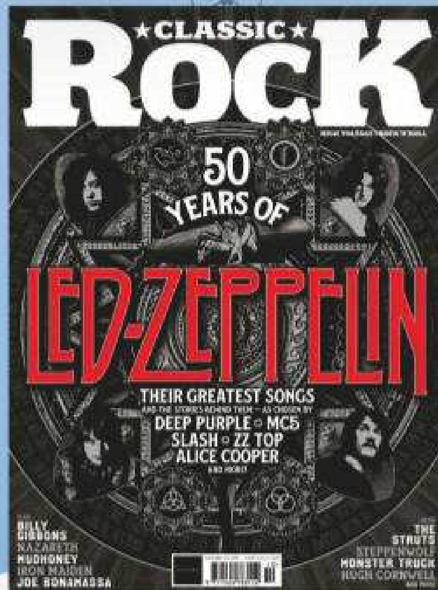


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